

Aboriginal Women in Education: Honouring Our Experiences

A Vision of Access to and Success Within the University

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores Aboriginal women's access to and success within universities through an examination of Aboriginal women's educational narratives, along with input from key service providers from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community. Implemented through the Wildfire Research Method, participants engaged in a consensus-based vision of accessible education that honours the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical elements necessary for the success of Aboriginal women in university. This study positions Aboriginal women as agents of social change by allowing them to define their own needs and offer viable solutions to those needs. Further, it connects service providers from the many disconnected sectors that implicate Aboriginal women's education access. The realities of Aboriginal women are contextualized through historical, sociocultural, and political analyses, revealing the need for a decolonizing educational approach. This fosters a shift away from a deficit model toward a cultural and linguistic assets based approach that emphasizes the need for strong cultural identity formation. Participants revealed academic, cultural, and linguistic barriers and offered clear educational specifications for responsive and culturally relevant programming that will assist Aboriginal women in developing and maintaining strong cultural identities. Findings reveal the need for curriculum that focuses on decolonizing and reclaiming Aboriginal women's identities, and program outcomes that encourage balance between two worldviews—traditional and academic—through the application of cultural traditions to modern contexts, along with programming that responds to the immediate needs of Aboriginal women such as childcare, housing, and funding, and provide an opportunity for universities and educators to engage in responsive and culturally grounded educational approaches.

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## Prologue

### *I begin with creation...*

This is our history as passed down from generation to generation by the Elders.

Our Elders are walking history books. They have acquired lifetimes of knowledge during their stay on Mother Earth. Although there may be no specific dates attached, nor Carbon-14 dating to support the accounts of this verbal history, it is the way we have recorded our story since our existence—long before Columbus, or the coming of Cartier. (Brant, 1995, p. 13)

The Haudenosaunee Creation Story has been passed down from generation to generation since the beginning of time on Mother Earth. While the Creation Story may take several days to be told in its entirety, I will present a short version of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story as I have come to know it.

This story begins in a place called Karonhià:ke, *The Place in the Sky*. It is said that a tree grew in the middle of Karonhià:ke that is known as “the tree of life.” This great tree grew all kinds of fruit: apples, peaches, pears, plums, and cherries. A man and a woman who lived in Karonhià:ke were expecting to have a baby. The woman began to have cravings for the bark, roots, and fruit of “the tree of life” and she went to that tree to satisfy her cravings. When she went there she noticed that there was a hole in the ground near that tree. Out of curiosity she looked down into the darkness. She could not see anything because it was so dark, so she leaned down looking further into the hole. She did not notice the dirt falling around her. As the dirt fell around her that hole got bigger and she began to fall. As she fell she quickly reached out to grab something to hold onto. She reached out and grabbed a strawberry plant with one hand and a tobacco plant with



the other but she kept falling with the plants in hand. She fell for a very long time grabbing all different kinds of seed from the tree roots along the way. She kept falling into a place where there was no land. At this place lived all of the water animals: turtles, fish, beavers, ducks, geese, otters, and muskrat. The geese saw this woman falling from the sky and they saw that she did not have webbed feet to survive in the water. They flew together allowing her to rest on their wings. They flew up high towards the sky trying to bring her back to where she came from. The geese became so tired that they went to the water animals for help. They rested Sky Woman on the Turtle's back to keep her above water. The water animals knew that she would not be able to rest there and she would need land to survive. Sky Woman opened her hand and the water animals saw the Strawberry Plant, the Tobacco Plant, and the seeds. They were reminded of the dirt that was way down deep below the water. The Beaver was a good swimmer and he offered to swim way down under the water to gather some dirt for those seeds so Sky Woman could eat. Beaver was gone a long, long time and eventually the animals saw his body come to the surface of the water. He was not moving at all and his animal friends knew that he had not made it. Next, the otter tried but he did not make it to the bottom of the water either. The other water animals tried to go way down to the bottom of the water to get some dirt but none of them made it. Finally, Muskrat who was the last of the water animals to try decided it was his turn. Muskrat was gone a very, very long time; much longer than the others. Eventually, Muskrat's body also came to the surface. The other animals examined him closely and he appeared to be lifeless but they noticed a movement in his eye. Muskrat opened his hand and they could see that he had a small amount of dirt from the bottom of the water. Muskrat went over to Sky Woman and gave

her that dirt. Sky Woman put the dirt in the middle of Turtle's back and then she began to dance a sideways shuffle in a circle around the dirt. As she danced and sang in her language the dirt began to expand and Turtle began to grow and grow until it became what is known as Turtle Island. That is the story of how life here on Mother Earth began as we know it today. (Figure 1, Visual Imagery of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story)

This Creation Story of Sky Woman is still as pertinent today as it has been since the time of creation. In recent times the story of Sky Woman has been used in a variety of mediums. The Kaha:wi Dance Theatre's production *A Story Before Time* is directly inspired by the Creation Story. Sandra Laronde's (2005) edited book, *Sky Woman: Indigenous Women who have Shaped Moved or Inspired us*, is a collection of poetry, short stories, and art work that celebrates Indigenous womanhood. Undoubtedly, Sky Woman lives on in our hearts, minds, and spirits. I present the Creation Story here, first, to illustrate the role that Aboriginal women have carried in our communities and the service of balance between men and women in community well-being. Second, as a Haudenosaunee woman who is becoming more grounded within my own cultural identity, I present it to honour the Creation Story of my people as I have come to know it. It is important that I start with creation and start with who I am as part of my journey in developing a strong identity. This is an important component of my own healing and decolonizing journey. I anticipate that encouraging other Aboriginal women to develop strong identities will be quintessential to their own decolonizing and educational journeys.

It is fitting to share this Creation Story as it is relevant to the development of a university access program that honours the stories of Aboriginal women. As a



*Figure 1. Visual Imagery of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story*

Haudenosaunee woman whose own story is invested in this project it is important that I understand myself and where I come from in order to move forward and know where I am going. I believe that it is important that we honour our Creation Stories and the lessons that they offer us about life, and our relationship to Mother Earth and all of creation. We must continue to honour these stories and revitalize them as part of our decolonizing journeys. This Creation Story and the relationships we have to Sky Woman are embedded in the Haudenosaunee languages. For example, “Jennifer Ionkiats” is how I have been taught to say “my name is Jennifer” in Mohawk. Looking deeper into the language reveals, however, that such translations are far too simplistic. A faithful translation to “Jennifer Ionkiats” is “Jennifer is the name she gave me.” Our names come from the women, our mothers and our clan mothers, and this speaks to the relationship we have to Sky Woman, deriving directly from our Creation Story as it has been passed down for generations. Here we can see that there is so much embedded into our languages about our relationships and our ways of being within creation.

While the vision of access to and success within universities at the heart of this research considers women from all nations, I offer and begin with my own Creation Story in hopes that I can empower other women to also honour where they come from and know who they are in their own decolonizing journeys. It is elemental to the success of an Aboriginal women’s journey in education to develop a strong identity.

I come from a storytelling people. Storytelling is integral to the ways in which knowledge and life lessons are shared amongst Aboriginal peoples. Teaching in Aboriginal communities often begins with the teacher sharing something about themselves (Anderson, 2000b). Many of our teachings are given in this way because this

strengthens the relationship between the storyteller and the listener. The teacher is able to draw the listener in by sharing something that situates himself/herself within the teaching and also relates a lesson to the listener. This allows the listener to understand the relationship that the storyteller has with what is being put forth by building a connection between the storyteller and the listener. Often times a teaching will be offered and it is up to the listener to draw from it as it relates to his/her own experiences. A storyteller can only offer knowledge as they have come to understand it themselves.

In building rapport and connectivity to the reader of this thesis, it is important that I first locate myself within the area of Aboriginal women's access to and success within university as it relates to my own experiences. Anderson (2000b) acknowledges the importance of self-locating when writing about Aboriginal women:

I could have written without mention of myself; I could have talked all about Native women ("them") and their development, and many readers would have been comfortable with the authoritative tone of such a text....Native people have suffered a particular brand of this objectification. (p. 21)

I don't profess to be any kind of an authority on Native women. I never will be. What I do know I have learned from speaking to the forty women that I interviewed for this book; and from my experience as a member of the Native community in southern Ontario. The "authority" of this book is therefore very closely tied to my personal experience. Another woman could have interviewed the same people and written a very different book. For this reason, I think it is important that the reader know something about me. (p. 22)

In honour of Aboriginal ways of contextualizing knowledge, I would like to begin by offering my own story. This will allow for an understanding of my relationship with the teachings, stories, and analyses that I will share hereinafter.

As an Aboriginal woman, mother, and student, I am inextricably linked to my thesis topic on the experiences of Aboriginal women in education. I have a very personal relationship to this thesis that manifests within a deep-rooted passion and understanding for the experiences shared by Aboriginal women in education. This passion and understanding situates me in a position where I am able to understand the struggles and the triumphs of other Aboriginal women from the inside out. It is from this perspective that I write about the experiences of Aboriginal women in education. Here is my story...

She:kon, Jennifer Brant Ionkiats. Kenhté:ke nitewaké:non tanon. Kanien'kehá:ka ni' ní:'i. Wakeniáhton ó:ni. *Hello, Jennifer Brant is my name. I come from Tyendinaga. I am a Mohawk of the Turtle Clan.* I am a single mother of two young boys: Jayden, who is 7, and Quinten, who is 2 years old. I am also a Master of Education candidate at Brock University.

My education journey began in September of 2002 when I was enrolled as an undergraduate student in a social sciences program. At that time I was pregnant with my first son, Jayden, who was born only 2 weeks before my final exams. Needless to say, my educational journey came with many challenges. Despite these challenges, I was determined to succeed not only for myself and my son, but also for the betterment of our communities.

My earlier days at university can be described, at best, as an alienating experience. As both an Aboriginal woman and a single mother, it was difficult to find a

sense of belonging within the university. I am familiar with the challenges of balancing my role of mother and student along with the other challenges I face with being an Aboriginal student in a Eurocentric education institution. As a first-generation student, I lack the familial support and familiarity of navigating university life. Much of my university experience was characterized by the university being a scary, unwelcoming place; it was unknown and unfamiliar territory. The following quote by Adrienne Rich (1986) is one that captures and reflects this experience of alienation:

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up demanding to be seen and heard. (p. 199)

I belong to a group that is highly underrepresented in universities and I have struggled to “be seen and heard.” I am an Aboriginal woman and I belong to a group that may be described as the most socially, economically, and politically oppressed in Canada. We share similar experiences within educational institutions and carry with us the stories that have been passed onto us from our relations.

My preliminary research in this area has revealed that my own experiences are not uncommon among other Aboriginal women in Canadian educational institutions. Moreover, my own experiences as a young Aboriginal woman along with the experiences of other young Aboriginal women in the community, is echoed by the demographic research that speaks to the trend of Aboriginal families being younger and larger and

more likely than non-Aboriginal families to be headed by single-mothers (Anderson, 2007). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that many Aboriginal women in university are single mothers who will also, by nature of their existence within the university, become familiar with the challenges of balancing their roles as mothers and students along with the other challenges associated with being an Aboriginal student in a Eurocentric education institution. Despite the barriers that I have faced within the realm of university life, there is a supportive Aboriginal community that has complemented my experience. This is a venue that embraces Aboriginal family in many on-campus events and social gatherings. It has allowed the university to become a familiar place for my children by way of having them come here for social and cultural events. To my children, the university is thought to be a friendly place where they come to drum, dance, and listen to our traditional teachers. I am hopeful that the university will continue to have this appeal for my children and these few cultural events that take place on campus will grow.

The experiences my children have been able to have at the university speak to the interconnectedness between mother and child. I anticipate that my educational successes will allow for the subsequent success of my children and I am hopeful that an access program designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal women and their children will have a similar intergenerational impact as we look forward towards the next seven generations.

As Aboriginal peoples, it is said that we need to know where we come from in order to move forward and know where we are going. Hampton (1995) writes:

To educate ourselves and our children we must start with who we are, with the traditions, the values and the ways of life that we absorbed as children of the people. An Elder told me, 'I am just one day old.' This day connects our past and



future, the child within to the Elder we hope to become. The identity of Indian people is that which links our history and our future to this day, now. (p. 22)

In doing this research, I intend to emphasize the importance of understanding the past, developing strong self-identities, and moving forward in a decolonizing way. This has prompted me to focus on self-reflection and strengthen my own identity as a Mohawk woman. I have done this by developing an understanding of my own historical past in the context of colonization, seeking the knowledge and guidance of traditional knowledge keepers to reclaim my cultural traditions and cultural identity, and through language development. It is important that I am grounded in my own identity as an Aboriginal woman before I can assist other young Aboriginal women in developing strong self-identities. For this reason, I began with the Creation Story of my people and I encourage other Aboriginal women to locate themselves within their own traditions as a way to connect the past with present and future. This mindset will allow Aboriginal women to bring their whole-selves into their education and support the need for balance between two worldviews. I plan to continue my research to reveal the experiences of Aboriginal women in Canadian universities and uncover the layers of oppression that they face throughout their educational journeys.

Brock University is a social institution that is in many ways an heir to its colonial legacy. The name of the University alone is demonstrative of this in that it is named after Sir Isaac Brock for his role in the War of 1812. His partner, Chief Tecumseh of the Shawnee tribe, was not acknowledged by the University for his role in the war alongside Sir Isaac Brock until 2004 when the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and

Education was established. The legacy of Chief Tecumseh at Brock University, however, does not do justice to the prominent role he played in the War of 1812.

As an Aboriginal woman in a colonial institution, I am situated in a particularly paradoxical situation. Smith (1999) captures this contradiction in the following:

Indigenous communities continue to view education in its Western, modern, sense as being critical to development and self-determination. While criticizing Indigenous people who have been educated at universities, on one hand, many Indigenous communities will struggle and send their children to university on the other. There is a real ambivalence in Indigenous communities towards the role of Western education and those who have been educated in universities. (p. 71)

I struggle with this tension of being positioned in a colonial institution as I attempt to secure my educational experience as a decolonizing journey. I have felt this tension both in my work as a graduate student and through my volunteer work in the community. As a graduate student attempting to advocate for Aboriginal women's access in education, I am firmly planted within these complexities. This position moves me to challenge the university to go beyond access and towards a more community-driven approach where the voices of Aboriginal women become elementary to their own program development and they become recognized for their valuable roles within the university.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The reality of Aboriginal women in Canada today stems from over 500 years of colonial contact with European settlers. Prior to European arrival in the Americas in 1492, there were flourishing Nations of First Peoples with well-established systems of governance and functioning social structures. These traditional systems of social order were “interdependent, equally valuable and flexible” (Anderson, 2007, p. 762). The settlers were amazed at how our societies functioned. The fact that the Constitution of the United States of America is based on the Haudenosaunee confederacy of the Six Nations, also known as *Kaianerenko’ :wa*, the Great Law of Peace, is testament to their amazement (Sakoieta Widrick, personal communication, September 29, 2009). Of particular interest to the European settlers was the role of women in Aboriginal societies. Our women were held in high esteem in our communities. In fact, many Aboriginal societies were and continue to be Matrilineal, among the Haudenosaunee, for example, the hereditary line of the clans is passed through the women, and Matriarchal in that the women held foundational roles in the political and governing structures of their society (Sunseri, 2009). Indigenous<sup>1</sup> Creation Stories are predominantly women centered and the power of women as life-givers and Mothers is central (Anderson, 2000b). The significant roles of women in the political, economic, and social arenas in many Aboriginal societies is evident in the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee where Clan Mothers are the ones who hold title to the land, choose and discuss male leadership, and carry out responsibilities essential to the well-being of the community (Amadahy, 2003; Sunseri, 2009). Traditionally, the balance among the roles and responsibilities of men and women

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term Indigenous throughout this Thesis to refer to the first peoples or land based peoples of a particular region or country in a global sense.

were integral to the flourishing social structures that “served our ancestors well for millennia” (Amadahy, 2003, p. 153). The following quotations affirm the importance of equitable relationships common in traditional Aboriginal societies:

The equality of men and women in pre-contact times was accepted as the voice for creation. Although their roles and responsibilities were different, men were not considered “better” or “more important” than women, or vice versa. The fulfillment of both roles together held a balance that was necessary for meeting both the physical livelihood and spiritual needs of the entire nation. These understandings were a continuing source of strength and peace for Aboriginal societies. (Harper, 2009, p. 176)

Brant-Castellanno (2009) offers her understanding of the balance between men and women in traditional societies by reflecting on a lecture given by Chief Jake Thomas at Trent University:

Chief Thomas spoke in metaphoric language about male and female and the relationship that prevailed between them in Traditional Iroquois society. He described the protocol for gathering medicine in these words: “When you go out to gather medicine it will be growing in families and you must leave the babies because they are the next generation. You must be careful to gather both the male and female, otherwise your medicine will have no power.”

The truth of Jake’s [Chief Thomas’] words resounded deep within me. What I heard was not just a recipe for preparing herbal remedies. I heard a profound statement about the nature of the universe and the ordering of relationships in alignment with natural forces. (p. 206)

As the above reveals, the balance that existed between the men and women was elemental to the well-being of the entire community. Men and women each had very specific roles and responsibilities in relation to family, community survival, and the living order of creation.

### **The Arrival of European Settlers on Turtle Island**

The balance that existed among the roles of men and women, however, was adversely disrupted by a series of events that occurred after contact. Upon the arrival of the European settlers, who came with the imperialist agenda of invasion and domination, it did not take long for the depopulation of Aboriginal peoples to occur. It is estimated that there was a 90% population decrease as a result of diseases, conquest, warfare, slavery, colonization, and starvation (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). It has been widely acknowledged that much of the decimation of Aboriginal populations during this time was a result of biological diseases, such as smallpox, measles, influenza, yellow fever, bubonic plague, cholera, and malaria, to which Aboriginal peoples had not yet developed immunity. According to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the trauma to Aboriginal communities occurred much earlier than is commonly acknowledged. Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) assert that within two generations of contact, an estimated one third to one half of the Indigenous populations of the Americas had been wiped out as a result of smallpox. The period of the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century when the Europeans first arrived has been described as a period of overall respect among the traditional peoples of this land and the newcomers. The 18th Century, however, has been described as one of imperial domination and pervasive conflict that continued well past the 18th Century.

Following on the heels of the period of contact and disease was what Wesley-Esquimaux (2009) refers to as the Missionization period in which “Native women came under the gaze of missionaries, men who could not see women as equals, because these men were coming from a place where women were inferior to men” (p. 16). The European newcomers came from societies that were hierarchal in nature and based on male superiority and female inferiority. The balanced and equitable roles of Aboriginal women in precontact societies, viewed as pagan and uncivilized, became the target of intense scrutiny (Harper, 2009).

Later, practices of colonialism through residential schools, discriminatory land and territory allocations, and legally sanctioned policies, such as the Indian Act, were paramount to the trauma done to our communities, particularly to the breakdown of the traditional family, where Aboriginal women and the leadership roles they played in our communities were targeted (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2006). Efforts to gain control over lands were strategic where “Aboriginal women were systemically disempowered as a prerequisite to ensuring the disintegration of our social structures and gaining access to our lands” (Amadahy, 2003, p. 153).

In spite of colonial efforts, many Aboriginal societies continue to honour the role of Aboriginal women in their communities. The fact that among the Haudenosaunee the roles of the Clan Mothers are still as relevant today as they were during precontact is testament to the resiliency of both Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women. Yet, there is still a very disheartening common reality for Aboriginal women in Canada that is a direct result of the attack on Aboriginal womanhood by the state. It is such a reality that “to be born poor, an Indian, a female is to be a member of the most disadvantaged minority in

Canada today, a citizen minus” (Kathleen Jamieson, cited in Cull, 2006, p. 141). As an Aboriginal woman, I belong to this category; I am a member of the most disadvantaged minority in Canada today and I am well versed in my colonial experience.

Contrary to the history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations and Canada’s persistence in the ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada today, the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, claims that Canada has no history of colonialism. This assertion made at the G20 meeting in Pittsburg on September 25, 2009, is demonstrably false and as such has generated substantial contention. In response, First Nation leaders demanded an apology. Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Chief, Shawn Atleo, stated "The future cannot be built without regard to the past. Internationally, Canada has been scrutinized and harshly criticized for its treatment of indigenous peoples and failure to respect aboriginal and treaty rights" (Dearing, 2010). Likewise, AFN's Ontario Regional Chief, Angus Toulouse, affirmed:

I am calling on the Prime Minister to immediately retract this inaccurate statement as clearly Canada does have a history of colonialism and for many years forcefully imposed assimilationist policies on the First Nations people in this country. The devastating effects of these harmful policies are still being felt within First Nation communities across this country. (Dearing, 2010)

Stephen Harper’s assertion that Canada has no history of colonialism on September 25, 2009, was made only a year after his public apology for the treatment of children in Indian residential schools. During his speech made on June 11, 2008, in the House of Commons, Harper acknowledged the wrongdoings of Canada’s assimilationist policies intended to “kill the Indian in the child.” Duncan Campbell Scott is notorious for the

often quoted statement he made in the 1920s when the residential school system was nearing its peak:

I want to get rid of the Indian problem....Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department. (Titley, 1986, p. 50)

Less than 100 years after this statement was made, our communities are permeated by the legacy of the residential school era. The continued disregard for the treatment of Aboriginal people in Canada speaks to refusal to recognize the greater social forces that continue to impact upon the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, the deplorable conditions that result from the legacy of historical, recent, and, arguably, more present forms of colonialism continue to be justified by the “Indian Problem” rather than looking into the greater social forces that continue to allow such conditions to exist.

Harper’s claims are an insult to the Aboriginal people of Canada. They render us invisible by ignoring and failing to honour our experiences and the experiences of our ancestors. Such a claim repudiates the Aboriginal experience to the point where there is no longer an “Indian question.” Any opposition to Stephen Harper’s claim of Canada as “having no history of colonialism” may easily be viewed as disruptive to anything that defines what is a “good” Canada. Susan Dion (2005) claims that, “Aboriginal people who resist ongoing injustice are positioned as militant radicals and an intolerable threat to the law and order of Canada” (p. 36).

While Stephen Harper fails to acknowledge the “Indian,” Canada, on the other hand, uses Aboriginality as a token to represent Canada’s rich and diverse cultural landscapes. Dion (2005) exhibits this trend of Aboriginal tokenism in the following:



Most non-Aboriginal people propagate a negative construction of “Indianness” when it is advantageous to do so, but also continue to have a positive fascination with Indians. A visit to any Canadian tourist shop will provide evidence of the Indian as a noble mystic whose image is used to sell everything from ashtrays to yo-yos. These Indians are at one with nature, able to survive the harsh wilderness and represent all that is truly Canadian. (p. 36)

The opening ceremonies of the 2010 Canadian Olympics serve as a blatant example of how Canada uses the “Indian” as propaganda when advantageous to do so. The opening ceremonies may be described as including a celebration of Aboriginal dance and culture. Moreover, a contemporary replica of the Inuit Inukshuk, Ilanaaq which means friend in Inuktitut, served as the logo and mascot of the 2010 Olympic Games. To the uncritical follower of the 2010 Olympic Games, this image of friendship amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples of Canada serves as prominence to a diverse, equitable, and just country. There was, however, a strong campaign that opposed holding the games on what is unceded Aboriginal land. Members of this grassroots movement are calling the Aboriginal leaders who were consulted with in the planning of the Olympic Games “sellouts.” Harriet Nahanee, a 71-year-old Squamish Elder who was active in the campaign opposing highway expansion that came with the 2010 Olympics was arrested for her attempt to save Eagleridge Bluffs from highway development. She was later imprisoned and served a 14-day sentence in the Surrey Pretrial Centre which is described as “a prison for men and a noted hell-hole for women” (Mair, 2007). Harriet Nahanee, who is described as a great-Grandmother and Aboriginal rights activist, suffered from asthma and was just getting over the flu at the time of her sentence. A week after her

release she was hospitalized with pneumonia and passed away only days later (Blunt, 2007). It is evident that the relationship that Aboriginal peoples have with the rest of Canada is complex, embodied with ongoing tensions, and, in the case of Harriet Nahannee, the injustices are undeniable.

While for many the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Olympic Games were a celebration of the Canadian “Indian,” one did not have to go far to see a different story of what it means to be “Indian” in Canada.

Amid the spectacle of the torch relay and opening ceremony ushering in the 2010 Olympic Games Indigenous women and their allies prepare for the 19th annual Memorial March in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. The event is held on Valentine’s Day and is an important time for the community to express their love for the over 70 women (about 1/3 Indigenous) who have been disappeared from the neighborhood. Led by Elders and family members people visit the sites where women’s bodies were found or they were last seen – healing ceremonies are conducted, people cry and remember their Mothers, Aunties, sisters, Daughters, friends. (Huntley, 2010, para. 1)

As an Aboriginal woman living in Canada, the stories of Aboriginal women going missing are all too familiar for me. These stories resonate so deep within me because they touch the lives of all Aboriginal women. Yet, these stories are not heard amid the celebrations of the 2010 Olympic Games.

In October 2004 Amnesty International released *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to the Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*, in response to the appalling number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada

who are victims of racialized and sexualized violence. This report prompted the inception of the Sisters in Spirit Campaign that is dedicated to promoting awareness and taking action against this tragedy. The Sisters in Spirit Campaign has been instrumental in assisting communities to hold annual candlelight vigils on October 4<sup>th</sup> to honour missing and murdered Aboriginal women across Canada. I have participated in a number of these candlelight vigils in support of the families and in support of other Aboriginal women as this adversity touches all Aboriginal women. Its effects reverberate deep within our communities. The 2009 report highlights the story of Daleen Kay Bosse, a 27-year-old university student and Mother who went missing in 2004. Four years later her remains were found and a man has been charged in connection with her murder (Amnesty International, 2009). These stories resound so deep within because these women are so similar to me in that many were Mothers, often they were both single Mothers and a significant number of them were engaged in postsecondary studies struggling to better their families. They are the Aboriginal women of Canada—Sisters, Daughters, Granddaughters, Mothers, Aunties—and their experiences are just as diverse as they are similar to my experience and to the experiences of the Aboriginal women participants whose stories are shared in this thesis.

The failure of Canada to take immediate action against the abuses of Aboriginal women is a shame. The celebration of Indigenous culture during the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Olympic Games, much like Stephen Harper's claim that Canada has no history of colonialism, negates the realities of Aboriginal people in Canada. It puts forth a distorted reality by failing to acknowledge the real life experiences and social injustices that we face. By condoning those realities, this public display justifies the

problematization of Aboriginal women who are blamed for the social and economic negative realities in which they live. In fact, the coming of the 2010 Olympics to Canada, however, has heightened these negative social and economic realities, where homelessness and prostitution have risen. This is a blatant example of the continued colonization of Aboriginal peoples, and the racialization and sexualization of Aboriginal women in Canada.

Aboriginal women endlessly find themselves in dangerous situations as a result of their social position in Canada. The current conditions, such as high suicide rates, imprisonment, unemployment, high dropout rates, and related issues, all form part of the legacy of this devastating past, which arguably continues today. Hodson (2004) maintains that:

The colonial experiment did not end in the early years of the twentieth century....colonialism is an ongoing reality that is conceived by governments, business, and industry for the express purpose of stealing lands, extinguishing cultures, often the people of those cultures, and absorbing the survivors into the greater society or marginalizing them to a position of servitude. (p. 3)

In response to the “colonial experiment” I put this research forth as part of the decolonization movement in which I situate education to become a decolonizing journey that includes a restoration of the traditional roles of Aboriginal women in our communities.

### **Aboriginal Women’s Realities in Canada Today**

As an Aboriginal woman, I can anticipate a life-expectancy rate that is 10 years less than that of other women in Canada (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,

1996). Data from the Canadian Population Health Initiative tell me that I belong to the unhealthiest group in Canada (Harper, 2009, p. 179). As an Aboriginal woman, I am likely to earn 30% less than non-Aboriginal women. I am three times more likely to contract HIV. I am five times more likely to die as a result of violence (Amnesty International, 2009). Further, as an Aboriginal Mother it is reasonable for me to be fearful of my children being taken away through state intervention. I belong to a group in which my position is exceedingly disadvantaged “by every common measure of poverty, such as income, educational attainment, incidence of disease and life expectancy” (Amnesty International, 2009, p. 7).

Demographic snapshots of Aboriginal Canada are indeed troublesome. As Harper (2009) puts it, “Aboriginal women are in a constant struggle against factors of race, class, and gender that are systemic within mainstream society, and they most often bear the burden of social and economic dysfunctions within their own communities” (p. 181). These social and economic dysfunctions are increasingly becoming recognized as symptoms of the colonial encroachment that has significantly altered traditional ways of life within Aboriginal communities. As a result, Aboriginal women may become alienated from their own community where, for some, the violence within the community has become commonplace:

I have a particular understanding of being victim and of being victimized. Like too many other Aboriginal people, I have become a victim. I was a victim of child sexual abuse, of a battering relationship, of rape. In the First Nations women’s community, that does not make me exceptional. I can tell you only of one Aboriginal woman in this country who I knew for sure has not survived incest,

child sexual abuse, rape or battering. It is worse than that because most of us do not survive one single incident of abuse and violence. Our lives are about the experience of violence from birth to death. (Monture-Angus, 1999, p. 84)

In reading the Amnesty International (2009) report *No More Stolen Sisters: The Need for a Comprehensive Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*, I came across a section entitled, *Lost to the Prison System*, where the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies provides a composite snapshot of Aboriginal women in prison. Typically, she:

is the sole-support Mother to two or three children. She is usually unemployed at the time she is arrested. She has often left home at an early age to escape violence. She may be forced to sell her body because she needs money and is unable to obtain a job. She is likely to have been subjected to racism, stereotyping and discrimination because of her race and colour [and] continued sexual, emotional and physical abuse. (p. 18)

In reading such a passage I am saddened and overcome with grief. It is appalling that these are the same demographics of Aboriginal women in Canada that I am using to describe the experiences of Aboriginal women in Canada and the need for educational access. As this portrait of the typical Aboriginal woman in prison echoes my own demographic portrait, I am left to wonder whether or not I may have ended up incarcerated had I not chosen to pursue my educational studies. If I was not sitting here today, where would I be? The following comment by Monture-Angus (1995) mirrors my speculations:

I have often been amazed that I landed at law school in Kingston, Ontario, only eight blocks away from the federal Prison for Women. I have always felt that I should have properly landed on the other side of that high limestone wall. It was both anger and amazement that took me on my journey to university. (p. 48)

The above demographics and personal stories make it evident that there are few options for Aboriginal women in Canada. However, I am confident that through an access program that addresses the immediate needs of Aboriginal women in university there can be alternatives.

When I read through Amnesty International's Stolen Sisters reports (2004, 2009) and attend the Sisters in Spirit vigils, what I hear and see are the stories of my people and the representations that I never saw as a lone Aboriginal woman in the classroom. The stories of my people and relative experiences were never presented in class materials or texts. The lack of positive representations and historical truths can be devastating for Aboriginal learners. The following statement reiterates the importance of the need for positive representations of who we are and where we came from:

Life today is so confusing. Many of us feel overwhelming helplessness. This is reflected in high suicide rates, alcohol and drug abuse, and over-incarceration. When an individual is able to understand from where we came, from proud and strong people, it is not so bad anymore. When we look at our present through our history, then we can see a future that is good. (O'Conner-Anderson, Monture & O'Conner, 2009, p. 111)

This quotation captures both the reality of Aboriginal women in colonial Canada as well as the need for us to understand our histories, and to know where we come from and where we are in the present before we can move forward.

Along with the aforementioned realities of Aboriginal women in Canada, contemporary realities also include early Motherhood. While the fertility rates of non-Aboriginal families are statistically low, the high rates of Aboriginal fertility ensure a changing demographic population. The high pregnancy rates among younger First Nations women, however, are becoming an issue of concern within the Aboriginal community. Specific to this thesis are the issues associated with both early Motherhood and early school leaving and the barriers young Mothers face in access to and within postsecondary education. As the experience of young Motherhood is common among Aboriginal women who are pursuing postsecondary studies, I will explore the topic of early Motherhood further in the following literature review.

### **Aboriginal Women's Leadership**

“It is women who give birth both in the physical and spiritual sense to the social, political and cultural life of the community” (Mary Ellen Turpel, cited in Anderson, 2007, p. 774).

While Aboriginal women in Canada face significant economic, social, and political disadvantages, manifested in extensive amounts of violence, racialization, sexualization, control, and oppressive legislation, they continue to persevere and, in fact, hold leadership roles in the movement towards social justice and community prosperity. As Mary-Ellen Turpel states above, Aboriginal women are regarded as the life givers of the community in both a physical and spiritual sense. “For Aboriginal women,



Motherhood represents a core aspect of a woman's being and it constitutes a benchmark component of an Aboriginal community well-being" (Cull, 2006, p. 141). The above quotes demonstrate the important role of Aboriginal women in community-building capacity. In this sense, they Mother the nation, the community, and the family. Restoring the balance in our communities through a revivification of women's roles is integral to the healing of our nations.

Through organizing grassroots initiatives, such as candlelight vigils and demonstrations to raise awareness and speak out against violence, through independent films, such as *Mohawk Girls* (Deer, 2006), and through the development of artistic organizations, such as Native Women in the Arts, Aboriginal women have been leaders in social justice and community development. Picking up where Canada significantly lags behind, Aboriginal women have literally walked across the country promoting awareness and demanding reparation. Indeed, Aboriginal women are both resilient and determined to generate social justice.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC; 2009) tells us that Aboriginal women in postsecondary education are growing at a much higher rate than both Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal women and doing exceptionally well despite the hardships:

Aboriginal women's educational achievements in recent years reflect the power of resiliency, strength and determination. Our women are now attending school at higher rates than both non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men, while continuing to raise their families; most often single handedly, and in situations of poverty. (para. 1)

This attests to the strength and leadership qualities of Aboriginal women who are often referred to as the “Strength of the Nation” and the “Backbone of Society.”

### **Aboriginal Women and Education**

The Aboriginal female population is growing much faster than the non-Aboriginal female population. The number of Aboriginal women and girls has risen 20.3% from 2001 to 2006 compared with only 5.6% for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The province-wide reality in Ontario is such that the population under 25 years of age makes up 46% of the total population and 70% of that population now resides in urban centers (Statistics Canada, 2009b).

Over the last decade, Aboriginal populations living in urban centers of Niagara and Hamilton have increased significantly. According to Statistics Canada (2009a), the Niagara-Hamilton Aboriginal Identity Population has increased from 12,450 in 2001 to 15,825 in 2006. In 2001, 1,090 of the total Aboriginal Identity population of Niagara-Hamilton were young Aboriginal women aged 15-24. In 2006 this number increased to 1,315. Associated with this population explosion are a number of reports suggesting that young Aboriginal women are having children earlier in their lives (Anderson, 2007; Hull, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2009a).

It is reasonable to propose that the increased population of Aboriginal peoples in the Niagara region reflect similar trends of Aboriginal families being younger, larger, and headed by young Aboriginal women. In fact, these social realities are reflected in the Niagara Region Community Profile from the 2006 Census released by Statistics Canada, which indicates that 1,095 young Aboriginal women in the Niagara-Hamilton Region are single Mothers. Presumably, a large proportion of these single Mothers are among the

1,315 Aboriginal women who are between the ages of 15-24 in the Niagara-Hamilton Region (Statistics Canada, 2009a). The lack of social and cultural supports along with the above social realities converge to create a situation where young Aboriginal women and their children are forced from the benefits of education at critical junctures resulting in cultural, economic, and wellness marginalization throughout their lives. The fact that 51% of the 1,315 young Aboriginal women aged 15-24 in the Niagara-Hamilton Region do not have a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2009a) not only demonstrates that the educational achievement of young Aboriginal women is significantly low, but, more importantly, it alludes to the lack of financial, cultural, familial, and childcare supports that young Aboriginal women need in order to have successful educational experiences.

At the same time, postsecondary educational attainment is on the rise for Aboriginal women in Canada. The educational achievement rates of Aboriginal women in Canada, however, are lagging in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Data from the 2006 Census suggest that in 2006, 9% of Aboriginal women in Canada had a university degree compared to 23% of non-Aboriginal women in Canada. Data also suggest that Aboriginal women are likely to postpone their postsecondary studies until later in life. There are more Aboriginal women in the older age categories (35-39 to 50-54) with postsecondary education than in the younger age groups (25-29 and 30-34); data suggest the opposite trend among the non-Aboriginal population where there are more younger women than older women with postsecondary education (Statistics Canada, 2009b). Moreover, a number of studies, including Statistics Canada's (2009c) Aboriginal Children's Survey, have concluded that pregnancy, the need to care for children, and family responsibilities have been the main reasons why young Aboriginal women have

left secondary or postsecondary school early. Given these demographics, it is reasonable to conclude that Aboriginal women have unique and specific needs with respect to post-secondary education.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there is a strong relationship between postsecondary education and employment among the Aboriginal population. For example, the employment rate for an Aboriginal woman with a high school diploma is 58% compared to 80% for those with a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2009b). Given the lack of support for young Aboriginal women in accessing higher education, such as financial and cultural supports and accessible culturally appropriate childcare, these women become marginalized from social and economic opportunities and, in turn, the well-being of the entire family may be compromised. This has the potential to implicate the future successes not only of young Aboriginal women but also of their children.

In response to the above realities, this project proposes to reveal the experiences of Aboriginal women in education and envisions the development of an Access Program for Aboriginal Women. My vision is to develop a university access program that embraces and responds to the realities of young Aboriginal women, encourages positive self-identities, and provides the women with the skills to succeed in the university and beyond. It is in this spirit that the proposed Access Program for Aboriginal Women will be a holistic response to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of those women and their children and will ultimately promote the well-being of Aboriginal families and strengthen the Aboriginal community.

While my intention is to encourage universities to embrace and respond to the immediate realities of young Aboriginal women, in keeping with Aboriginal ideals of looking forward to the next seven generations, this research presumes that to have a significant impact on an Aboriginal student's general well-being and subsequent school achievement, we need to provide culturally appropriate educational opportunities for the Mothers of young children. This must also include opportunities where the traditional parenting and life skills practices of Aboriginal families are honoured along with a culturally appropriate focus on the early years of a child as a way to encourage their later educational success. This, in turn, will assist the young Aboriginal women of the Niagara Region in maintaining strong families and a strong community.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to reveal the educational experiences of Aboriginal women, as told through their own educational narratives, to identify the barriers that Aboriginal women face with access to and success within university institutions. This study will provide an in-depth understanding of the educational experiences of Aboriginal women through a reflection of the past, present, and future. An examination of the women's narratives, along with key contributions from frontline workers and cultural advocates, will reveal to what extent an Aboriginal women's access program is needed and what an access program that is designed to meet the holistic needs of Aboriginal women and their families should comprise.

It is my goal to use my research findings to advocate for the creation of safe spaces in the university in which the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their children are addressed promoting Aboriginal women's

access to and success within universities. This research will provide grounding for me (and possibly the women participants) to challenge university institutions to provide environments in which our presence and needs as Aboriginal women are recognized as opportunities rather than barriers.

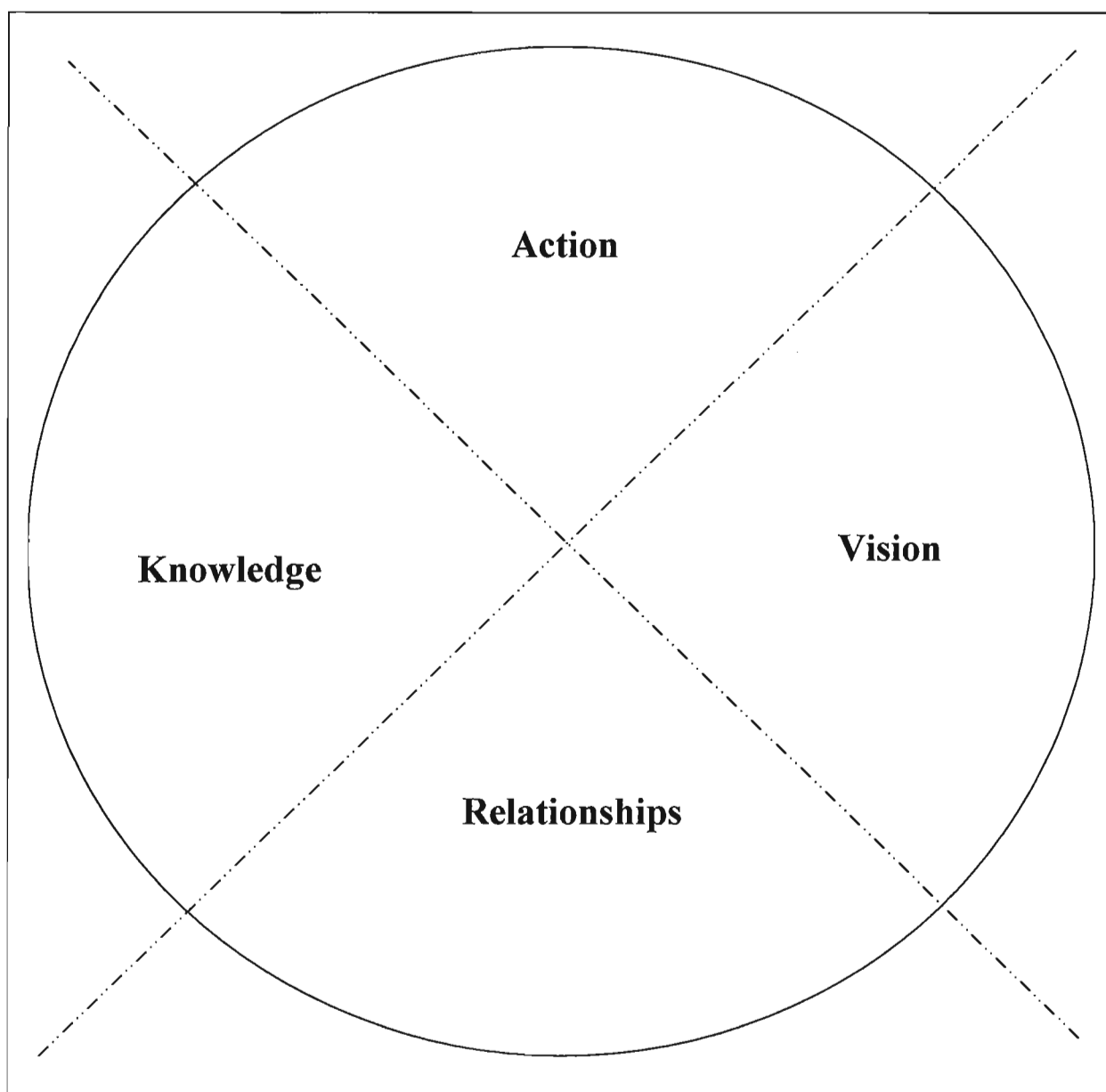
### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following four overarching components of the Medicine Wheel Teaching: Vision, Relationships, Knowledge, and Action (see Figure 2). According to Hodson (2004), the Medicine Wheel Teaching that informs the Wildfire Research Method was offered by an Elder at the first Wildfire Gathering in 1999:

This particular Teaching recalls that every human activity begins with a *vision* or an idea. If that vision is to become a reality, certain *relationships* must be established and certain kinds of *knowledge* must be gathered that is related to that *vision*. Finally, the *action* stage where activities are undertaken that are directly related to making the *vision* a reality. (p. 62)

The four research questions that guided this study are as follows:

*1. Vision.* The vision is to reveal the many intersecting barriers Aboriginal women face with respect to access to and success within universities, and to use the participants' narrative to envision an access program that embraces the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical realities of young Aboriginal women, encourages positive self-identities, and provides them with the skills to succeed in the university.



*Figure 2.* The Medicine Wheel framework.

2. *Relationships*. What relationships are needed to improve the Aboriginal women's experiences in university and help them to succeed (i.e., relationships with faculty, student support services, administration services, child care providers, and community support services)?

3. *Knowledge*. How has Aboriginal knowledge, traditions, and ways of being been represented in the women's experience of education to date? What kind of knowledge is needed for the women to be successful?

4. *Action*. What steps are needed to be put in place to achieve Aboriginal women's access to and success within universities?

### **Research Approach**

I will implement the Wildfire Research Method (Kompf & Hodson, 2000) to collect data from Aboriginal women some of whom are undergraduate students and some of whom would like to attend university. Using this method, I intend to guide a discussion around the experiences the participants have had as students and reveal what barriers and challenges they have faced as well as discuss what needs they have, and what relationships they need to have in order to pursue higher education. A Wildfire Gathering involves an Elder who guides the Circle through the offering of opening and closing prayers, smudging ceremonies, and other traditional practices. The strength of this research design is that it will allow participants to be involved in a holistic, invitational, and comfortable atmosphere that is consistent with traditional Aboriginal teachings and beliefs.



## **Rationale**

Our Elders tell us that it has taken seven generations of colonization to get to our current state and that we must look forward towards the next seven generations through a decolonization process as a way to restore the balance in our communities. In looking forward seven generations, this project is put forth as part of the decolonization process in that it conceives that the healing of our Nations rests in the healing of our Aboriginal women through a restoration of the balance that existed seven generations ago and since time immemorial. It positions education as a fundamental component in the healing of Aboriginal women. It is, however, elemental that the education must honour an Aboriginal worldview of teaching and learning. It must foster holism and the understanding of the interconnected relationships that education plays in families and communities, and value the lifelong learning journey of education in our communities. In this spirit, this project presumes that the education of Aboriginal women will be significantly beneficial to the subsequent education of their young children.

The income gap between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples remains a pressing social concern that has received increased attention through a number of reports. These reports link higher levels of education with increased labour market participation and higher levels of earned income (Mendelson, 2006; Usher, 2009; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). A recent study published by Wilson and Macdonald (2010) has actually found that the income gap between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples changes significantly for Aboriginal peoples with university degrees. Moreover, this study informed that for Aboriginal women with university degrees the income gap diminishes all together where the median income for Aboriginal women is, in fact, higher

than it is for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This trend is even more significant for Aboriginal women with graduate degrees. With Aboriginal women being the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population, their education successes will, undoubtedly, contribute to their improved socioeconomic status and, by extension, will contribute to the overall social well-being of Aboriginal communities in Canada.

As mentioned earlier, the Aboriginal population is demographically younger and increasing much faster than non-Aboriginal population, meaning that Aboriginal workers will form a significantly increased portion of the labour market. As such, access to and improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples will fuel future economic prosperity in Canada resulting in improved socioeconomic status and contributing to the overall social well-being of Canada (Mendelson, 2006; Usher, 2009).

This thesis will also rest upon existing goals of Aboriginal education as outlined in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996):

For more than 25 years, Aboriginal people have been articulating their goals for Aboriginal education. They want education to prepare them to participate fully in economic life of their communities and in Canadian society. But this is only part of their vision. Presenters told us that education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations. (p. 434)

From an Aboriginal perspective, education must be positioned as part of a lifelong learning process that involves children, youth, adults, and Elders. Informal and experiential learning through social, cultural, and recreational activities are also integral to a holistic lifelong learning model of education (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

## Theoretical Framework

While much of the literature on women in education draws on a variety of feminist theories, these particular discourses are not sufficiently relevant to Aboriginal women in education as Aboriginal societies were and are traditionally based on complementary roles and communal responsibilities between men and women.

I have chosen to draw on Kim Anderson's (2000b) theory of identity formation to inform the theoretical underpinnings of this study. In developing this theory, Anderson borrowed from other identity formation theories that have been applied to oppressed groups and developed it through an Aboriginal approach "in which past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected" (p. 15). Anderson presents her theory of identity formation "to propose that Native women engage in a process of self-definition that includes four steps: *resist*, *reclaim*, *construct* and *act*" (p. 15). More specifically, this identity formation process involves:

- resisting negative definitions of being;
- reclaiming Aboriginal tradition;
- constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; and
- acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of our communities. (Anderson, 2000b, p. 15)

Through this framework, Anderson (2000b) conceptualizes the reconstruction of Native womanhood by reflecting on the past, present, and future connections of Aboriginal women as they apply to her theory of identity formation. Throughout this thesis I also reveal the ways in which the past, present, and future connect by

contextualizing the historical experiences of Aboriginal women as they shape their present social and cultural realities. Looking towards future positive identity formation, as Anderson reveals, must include processes of resisting, reclaiming, constructing, and acting.

This research is guided by the above theoretical framework with an emphasis on encouraging the development of strong cultural identities through culturally relevant educational experiences that will assist Aboriginal women in achieving balance between two worldviews through the application of traditional knowledge to modern contexts. As the first teachers of the future generations, the advancement of Aboriginal women in Canada will ultimately promote the development of stronger healthier communities allowing Aboriginal women and families to reach their full potentials.

### **Importance of the Study**

Education has always been of high importance among Aboriginal people. In precontact societies, Aboriginal women and Elders played a significant role in education. There was an emphasis on experiential education and lifelong learning. As Youngblood Henderson (1995) writes “Our communities were our classrooms, our families and our sacred order provided the methodology....The linguistic world-view and values were passed from generation to generation; they continue to shape Indian educational aspirations” (p. 247).

This study is important because, rather than offer a demographic snapshot of Aboriginal women in education, it goes deeper into the educational narratives and lived experiences of women to envision their access to and success within universities. This study positions women as experts in their own lives, and empowers them to tell their own

stories, discuss their educational aspirations, and determine their own needs. This allows for a holistic approach that enables women to bring their whole-selves into the process. Finally, it presents an informative source that reveals the expressed needs of Aboriginal women in education and urges universities to act on their vision of access and success.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As Aboriginal women, we all have our own unique stories; yet, we do share a common history of colonialism, dispossession, and forced assimilation. I will discuss these colonial initiatives in more detail in Chapter Two. This history shapes the relationship that Aboriginal women have to the Canadian education system in multiple and varying ways. The women in this study, therefore, have a lot in common with other Aboriginal women in education. This study was, however, limited to a very specific group of women who share similarities related to demography, geography, and community affiliation. It is important to note that the stories shared are unique to the women participants in this study and are not necessarily reflective of the educational experiences of all Aboriginal women in Canada.

My own experience of education is irrevocably intertwined within the educational narratives that are put forth in this thesis. I am a Haudenosaunee woman of the Mohawk Nation who is familiar with the barriers that Aboriginal women face in education as I have and continue to face them myself in my everyday experiences within university. By offering my personal story, I have become a participant in this study. In this way, I am emotionally invested in this thesis; it is an expression and extension of my own story. My educational narrative, as it is shared through an examination of the barriers I have faced and my journey towards strengthening my own cultural identity, is unique as it is

personal, but at the same time is deeply connected to the experiences of other Aboriginal women through the common historical and sociocultural experiences we share.

A final limitation rests in my personal lens that is placed on this study. I am connected to the women participants through ancestry, geographical location, and community affiliation. This provides me with a different lens on the women's narratives than someone from outside these connections and it is, therefore, unreasonable for the reader to assume that I am objective in my analysis of the data. I believe this is a strength of this research as I have a deeper understanding of the women's experiences through my own lived experiences.

### **Outline of Subsequent Chapters**

Chapter Two provides a literature review of the barriers faced by Aboriginal women in education and offers a preliminary vision of what an access program for Aboriginal women may comprise. Finally, it contextualizes the experiences of Aboriginal women as Mothers through a historical, political, and sociocultural analysis and positions their realities as an educational opportunity. Chapter Three explores the context in which research is situated within Aboriginal communities. I then present the Wildfire Gathering Research Method as it was used in this qualitative study to understand the educational narratives of Aboriginal women as they are related to university access and success. In Chapter Four, I offer my personal educational narrative to give a detailed understanding of the complexities of multilayered experiences and the ways in which they shape subsequent educational experiences and identity. This chapter also examines the barriers I have personally faced in my educational journey. Chapter Five includes a detailed understanding and analysis of the findings from two Wildfire Gatherings revealing the

unique and multi-layered experiences of Aboriginal women in education. Chapter Six presents a discussion and conclusion to this study in which I suggest recommendations and position the reclamation of language and culture along with responsive programming as integral to the educational successes of Aboriginal women.

## CHAPTER TWO: LEARNING EHSKANYAI

Ehskanyai (the women's shuffle dance) is a Haudenosaunee ceremonial dance. I chose the title *Learning Ehskanyai*, as a metaphor to represent Aboriginal women as they learn to shuffle their intersecting roles involved with family, school, work and community, and the negotiations that are made as Aboriginal women move their way through Eurocentric educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> I also use it to represent the "learning" that I envision is involved in a holistic program that addresses the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their children. My vision is to use Aboriginal women's narratives to drive the creation of an access program that responds to the needs of Aboriginal families and encourages women to strengthen and reclaim their own cultural identities through ceremony and traditional dance. In this way, Aboriginal women will benefit from a program in which Aboriginal languages, cultures, and traditions are core components.

The following discussion serves as a literature review that demonstrates the barriers Aboriginal women face in universities and speaks to the need for an access program for Aboriginal women. I begin by offering a demographic overview to demonstrate the current realities in which Aboriginal women students are situated. I then situate these current realities in a historical and sociocultural context. A thorough discussion of the barriers Aboriginal women face in education follows. That discussion provides the basis for thinking about an access program for Aboriginal women entering

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<sup>1</sup> When I approached the Aboriginal Education Council of Brock University with the idea of developing an Aboriginal Women's Access Program entitled, *Learning Ehskanyai*, I was advised not to use the title *Learning Ehskanyai* as *Ehskanyai* is a very sacred and ceremonial dance and its use as a title for a university program would raise issues associated with the ownership of ceremonial information. While this title will not be used for any programming stemming from this research, I chose, however, to keep the title *Learning Ehskanyai* for this chapter only as it is personally tied to my own spiritual growth and cultural identity development.



university. In addition, the ways in which these contexts influence contemporary trends in Aboriginal families will be examined. I will then discuss the reclamation of an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood as a way to heal our Nations. This will include a discussion of the restoration of women's leadership roles in Aboriginal communities, and reclamation and revisioning of the traditions and the ceremonies involved in Aboriginal family planning. This presents an educative opportunity that is not only inclusive of Aboriginal traditions but honours Aboriginal women as they are the first teachers of the future generation.

### **Demographics**

As noted in detail in Chapter One, the Aboriginal population is significantly younger and growing rapidly in comparison with the non-Aboriginal population. With the Aboriginal population becoming younger and larger, the number of Aboriginal peoples entering postsecondary education is growing and this is important because education is critical to improving the social and economic realities faced by Aboriginal peoples. Further, 70% of new jobs in Canada will require a postsecondary education. Yet, education is less accessible for Aboriginal students who are more likely than non-Aboriginal students to face the challenges of health problems, poverty, racism, and issues related to geography and demography (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2004).

As a result of these issues, the government of Canada through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has set up a Postsecondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) to provide financial assistance to eligible students. This includes funding for tuition, a set amount for books and supplies, and a living allowance. It is important to note that the living allowance typically provided through PSSP for eligible students is less than the

amount allowable by the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). Moreover, the living allowance offered by some Band offices is the same for single students and students with dependents, while OSAP recipients with one dependent are eligible for more than twice the amount of those with no dependents. This is problematic for Aboriginal students who may need to find other sources of funding for living expenses, especially for young Aboriginal parents, including single Mothers. The differential living allowance speaks to the value placed on Aboriginal students in comparison to other students. While the PSSP policy is intended to encourage Aboriginal students to pursue postsecondary studies, with the objective of helping students attend and succeed in their programs (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2004, p. 13), it does not address these financial barriers.

Among Aboriginal women who are Mothers, one out of three are single Mothers, and the average annual income of these women is \$16,000. Moreover, one third of these women are raising three or more children (Anderson, 2007). Given these demographics, it is reasonable to conclude that many Aboriginal women in university are single Mothers. Surely, funding student tuitions and minimal expenses is not an adequate response to the financial realities of Aboriginal students, specifically women, who attempt to pursue a university education. This is critical because there are high rates of adolescent pregnancies in Aboriginal communities and these increasing rates, along with the trend of a young growing Aboriginal population, make an adequate response to the financial barriers young Aboriginal women face indispensable. Universities are in a position to respond to these barriers by providing accessible educational opportunities. The well-being of these young Aboriginal women, who are heading younger and larger

families, is dependent on accessible education that responds to their spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs.

### **Setting the Scene: The Historical and Sociocultural Realities of Aboriginal Women**

The experiences of Aboriginal women in university today cannot be understood without first understanding the historical and sociocultural realities that shape their everyday lives. The social status of Aboriginal women in Canada today must be understood in context of the historical assimilationist initiatives and current racist and sexist attacks on Aboriginal women. Both the intent and extent of these attacks on Aboriginal women are captured in the following Cheyenne Proverb “A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong their weapons” (Harvard-Lavell & Corbiere Lavell, 2006, p. 184). Long-term and recent history in Canada involves a number of legally sanctioned initiatives that were significant to the social status of Aboriginal women. These initiatives came to surface in the late 1800s when the binary images of the Indian princess or the Indian “Squaw” were becoming deeply embedded into the Euro-Canadian consciousness (Carter, 2006). As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the public and private spheres of the Western family were also being introduced. This time is described as one where there was a shift from family-centered working environments towards environments where men worked away from the home while women were mainly responsible for the domestic duties of the home. The characteristics of the middle class ideals of Motherhood that surfaced during this era served to justify the moral regulation of Aboriginal women who were viewed as dirty, dissolute, and dangerous, and the

governing of traditional Aboriginal family practices that were viewed as uncivilized and uncivilizing (Anderson, 2007; Carter, 2006).

The Indian Act of 1876 was “designed to create a patriarchal family unit in First Nations societies that already had a variety of kinship systems, including many matrilineal and matrilineal ones” (Fiske, 2006, p. 307). Cull (2006) describes this act as being “one of the most influential and intrusive acts of legislation in Canadian history” (p. 147). This act was part of an assimilationist framework in which every aspect of life for Aboriginal peoples was regulated as they were forced into a state of dependency. Through this act, the identity of the “Indian” as inferior and unfit was developed and Aboriginal women were deemed unfit Mothers who were uncivilized and uncivilizing. The marriage laws under this act and Bill C-31 (see, Fiske 2006) were significant to the regulation and subjugation of Aboriginal women. The customary marriage practices of Aboriginal societies were viewed as “suspicious” and “less genuine” than the legal marriages of the church. As a result, women who lived with men and were not legally married according to the state could be charged with immorality under the Indian Act and this could result in a jail term (Fiske, 2006). Presumably, this had significant implications for the stability of traditional Aboriginal societies as it led to the suppression of traditional family planning practices such as customary marriage ceremonies. Further, it is likely that it was a deterrent for women and men to live together for fear of being charged under the act and possibly serving jail time.

The pass system was also sanctioned under this act. Under this system, the freedom for Aboriginal women to be seen off the reserve was limited. This was justified by the assumption that Aboriginal women went into the town only to work as prostitutes

and, therefore, they must be confined to the reserve in order to keep the cities clean. This system severely limited Aboriginal women's access to resources and employment opportunities.

The residential school system sanctioned under the Indian Act was instrumental to the repression of the traditional family practices of Aboriginal communities and significant in the moralizing campaign of Aboriginal women whose Mothering practices were deemed unfit and uncivilized. The residential school system involved legally sanctioned church-run institutions in which Aboriginal children were taken from their families and home communities and placed in boarding style schools where they were given European names and forbidden to speak their languages or practice their cultures. This entailed "training women for their exclusively domestic roles....[and] providing a gendered education that would foster a male breadwinner family model. Boys were trained in trades and farming and girls were schooled in domestic science" (Anderson, 2007, p. 763). The children in these schools were subject to sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; they were cut-off from their families and home communities, and were taught to be ashamed of their cultures and traditional family practices (Anderson, 2007). This was a deliberate attack in attempt to erase Aboriginal cultures, languages, and traditions, and to civilize the "Indian." The first residential school to open in Canada opened in the 1880s. Between 1910 and 1930, 75% of Aboriginal children were in residential schools (Anderson, 2000b). In 1980, residential school students began disclosing sexual and other forms of abuse. The last residential school closed in 1996, the Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan (Assembly of First Nations, 2009). The abuse experienced by these students had devastating effects for Aboriginal communities.

Children left the residential schools without parenting skills and without the knowledge of their family traditions (Anderson, 2007). Entire languages have been lost, cultural shame is prevalent, and there are significant feelings of mistrust towards the public education system. While the residential school system was sanctioned to solve the “Indian problem,” it actually created many of the problems that Aboriginal communities face today, including the shift away from traditional family planning practices. These problems now serve to justify the stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples as inferior.

Residential schools were not the only assimilationist tactic that involved the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes. Following on the heels of the residential school experience, the “Sixties Scoop” involved agents of the state going into Aboriginal communities, apprehending Aboriginal children, and relocating them away from their parents, siblings, families, communities, clans, language, customs, and culture (Cull, 2006). While in 1959 only 1% of children in state care were Aboriginal, it has been estimated that there were 30 to 40% of children in state care by the end of the 1960s even though the Aboriginal population of Canada was less than 4% (Anderson, 2003). Cull maintains that:

The removal of Aboriginal children and youth from their parents and communities has been linked to a host of social pathologies such as very high suicide rates, sexual exploitation, substance use and abuse, poverty, compromised educational attainment and chronic underemployment. (p. 144).

This demonstrates the impact that these policies have on the social realities of Aboriginal communities today.

The eugenics movement was another deliberate attack on the survival of Aboriginal communities. The eugenics movement, justified by the dominant stereotypes of Aboriginal women as inferior, uncivilized, and unfit to parent, allowed for the legal sterilization of Aboriginal women without their consent. While more research needs to be done in this area, studies suggest that 25-50% of Aboriginal women in Canada were sterilized involuntarily during the height of this act between 1970 and 1976 (Anderson, 2007). In fact, this procedure was often done without the consent of the woman. For example, in 1959 at the age of 14 an Aboriginal woman named Leilani Muir was sterilized without her consent. Leilani Muir was unaware of this procedure until she began having difficulty conceiving. The impact of the eugenics movement on Aboriginal women was not known until Leilani Muir successfully sued the government of Alberta (Cull, 2006, p. 148).

Understanding the social realities of Aboriginal women through the above historical, political, and sociocultural contexts is necessary to the conceptualization of responsive educational opportunities. As noted earlier, education is critical to improving the economic and social realities of Aboriginal women. However, the lack of culture, languages, and positive representations of Aboriginal peoples in education today reflects earlier assimilationist policies. Hampton (1995) affirms that “Indian children face a daily struggle against attacks on their identity, their intelligence, their way of life, their essential worth. They must continually struggle to find self-worth, dignity, and freedom in being who they are” (p. 35). This struggle forces Aboriginal women, who want to pursue a university education in order to make a better life for themselves and their families, into situations of oppression, exclusion, and alienation. This reality, much like

the historical assimilationist policies, continues to threaten Aboriginal women who remain “the backbone” of their communities.

Margaret Lavalle is cited in Kenny (2006) as advising “When the women heal the family will heal. And when the family heals, the nation will heal” (p. 551). Kenny advises that this statement speaks to the critical role of women in Aboriginal communities. It implies that healing in Aboriginal communities begins with the healing of Aboriginal women. Thriving communities depend on Aboriginal women who are referred to as the backbone of their communities. As Mothers, Aboriginal women are the first teachers of future generations but they also are viewed as ‘Mother’s of the Nation’ by way of their political roles within their communities. These ideals are put forth to demonstrate that healing Aboriginal nations begins with healing Aboriginal women. With education being essential to improving the social and economic realities that are faced by Aboriginal peoples and, by extension, healing Aboriginal communities, improving the educational opportunities of young Aboriginal women is a must. Thus, it is important to promote Aboriginal women’s access into universities, as a way to respond to the current realities of Aboriginal women and, by extension, to heal Aboriginal families, communities, and nations. An access program for Aboriginal women that will promote the well-being of Aboriginal women, families, communities, and nations must address the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their children. The following section discusses the barriers faced by Aboriginal students to determine their needs and envisions how an access program designed for Aboriginal women might look.



## **Examining the Barriers Faced by Aboriginal Learners in Mainstream Education**

This section of the literature review focuses on the barriers that Aboriginal students face in mainstream education. This section is divided into the following subsections: Eurocentrism, Silencing: Exclusion and Invisibility, Geography, Language and Aboriginal Approaches to Learning.

### **Eurocentrism**

Perhaps the most prevalent and most difficult barrier to overcome for Aboriginal women engaged in mainstream education is Eurocentrism. Youngblood Henderson (2000) defines Eurocentrism as follows:

The cognitive and educational legacy of colonialization is labeled “Eurocentrism.” Eurocentrism is an intellectual and educational movement that postulates the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans. Eurocentrism has been the dominant artificial educational context for the last five centuries and is an integral part of all existing scholarship. It includes a predatory set of assumptions and beliefs about empirical reality or the world. Habitually educated and usually unprejudiced Europeans accept these assumptions and beliefs as true, as propositions supported by the facts. (p. 64)

Battiste (1998) maintains that universities “support and reinforce Eurocentric contexts and consequences, ignoring Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and thought, while claiming to have superior grounding in Eurocentric history, literature, and philosophy” (p. 22). Further:

The universality of Eurocentrism creates a strategy of difference that leads to racism, which allows Europeans and colonialists to assert their privileges while

exploiting Indigenous people and their knowledge. Eurocentrism must be analyzed and challenged at every instance it appears, just as Indigenous peoples must come to understand the sociohistorical context that was created by Eurocentrism and how it continues to affect our daily lives and negotiated, often manufactured, identities. (p. 22)

Monture-Angus (1995) demonstrates how Eurocentrism exists in mainstream education by pointing out that mainstream education reflects the values of Canadian society. She maintains that Canadian education is grounded within a White patriarchal middle class system of values that reinforces these values over other competing values. The Canadian education system exists in a society that does not value an Aboriginal worldview. Thus, the education system does not value an Aboriginal worldview. For Aboriginal students, the result is exclusion and oppression (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 98). Monture-Angus (1995) maintains that these oppressive relations continue to dominate the education system. She examines how these oppressive relations operate through a discussion of the assimilationist philosophy and the missionary approach to education. The assimilationist philosophy is the idea that “Through education we will naturally better the lesser status of these individuals to a greater degree than the general benefits of education to people who do not belong in the lesser category” (p. 99). The missionary approach to education is defined as “the approach in which education professionals assume that all students gravitate to the same value base as they do. It assumes there is one history and that one history is the truth” (p. 117). Monture-Angus (1995) advises that this assumption is usually an unconscious one that derives from one’s own experiences and she connects these experiences to the concept of White privilege (p. 117). Through

her review of these oppressive relations, she demonstrates how exclusions exist in the very structure of the institutions through the environment of the classrooms, and through the course offerings and the contents of those courses. She describes educational institutions as having inhospitable environments that do not facilitate Aboriginal learning. Monture-Angus (1995) describes the typical classroom environment as being one of the most obvious barriers that Aboriginal people face in mainstream education settings. She advises that a more hospitable environment for Aboriginal students would be one where students could sit in a circle. In this way everyone is equal and diverse voices are valued (p. 83).

Because the education system is based on a Eurocentric worldview, involves teaching from a Eurocentric perspective, and enforces Eurocentric values and norms, both the assimilationist philosophy and the missionary approach to education are entrenched in the education of Aboriginal people. These systems of oppression will not be eradicated from the education system until Aboriginal histories and truths are presented and an Aboriginal worldview included in the education system.

### **Silencing: Exclusion and Invisibility**

Battiste (1998) maintains that Aboriginal students are given a “fragmented existence” through an education that does not “mirror” them. Furthermore, the historical and social contexts that have led to these “fragmented existences” are not addressed. Youngblood Henderson (2000) also maintains that it is through “artificial Eurocentric contexts” that most Professors describe the “world,” ignoring Aboriginal worldviews, knowledge, and thought. For Aboriginal students, invisibility and alienation result as they

are stripped of their identity (p. 76). Monture-Angus (1995) argues that Aboriginal children do not leave the education system with a positive Aboriginal identity.

Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) advises that her article *Self Portrait: Flint Woman* was written during a time when she was overwhelmed by the number of ways she was silenced and excluded throughout her university education (p. 29). I can identify with this feeling of frustration because my own experience of education was and continues to be characterized by silence and exclusion. I have always felt excluded from the classrooms and the course content. For me this is not just a feeling, it is my reality as an Aboriginal woman in a mainstream education system. When most of my professors have addressed the class as “you” or “us,” I am aware that I am not included in that “you” or “us.” Reflecting on my own experiences, I believe that this was not a deliberate exclusion at the hands of my professors. I do believe, however, it is a failure on their part to ensure that they are teaching in an inclusive way. I see this experience of exclusion reflected in the experiences of exclusion that Patricia Monture-Angus speaks out about. This includes the lack of scholarship written by Aboriginal peoples in course materials and the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum (Monture-Angus, 1995). Monture-Angus (2003) also connects the lack of mentorship for Aboriginal women in university to exclusion. She asserts that the lack of a mentor in the university is an issue of race, culture, and gender. Aboriginal women are excluded from mentorship in the university. Monture-Angus refers to this exclusion as a process of denying success to “outsiders.” This highlights the importance of a mentorship program for Aboriginal women in university.

Antone (2000) also discussed her own realization of how “silenced and muted her voice had become” (p. 3) through a reflection on her formal education. Through her research, she found that other students had been silenced as a result of their formal education. Through her doctoral studies she explored the impact of formal education on Aboriginal peoples and this brought her to reflect on her own experiences. Through this reflection, she became aware of how regaining a positive self-identity allowed her to reclaim her voice. These examples demonstrate that the experiences of Aboriginal women in university are characterized by silence and exclusion. Thus, as part of an access program that responds to the needs of Aboriginal women, issues of exclusion must be addressed and Aboriginal women must be empowered to find their voices.

Reflecting on her experiences of silence and exclusion, Monture-Angus (1995) has made a conscious decision to give her students the opportunity to develop their voices (p. 32). She maintains that to end exclusion and silencing, it is important for students to find their voices. She asserts that students receive their voices when they become empowered and overcome the silencing (p. 29). Monture-Angus argues that the empowerment that comes when one finds his/her own voice is missing in our education systems because diverse voices are silenced and students are forced to conform to the status quo. As a university professor, she feels that it is her responsibility to be empowering. Thus, for her learning to teach is about learning how to respect different voices, and about empowering students to find their unique voices (p. 32). Monture-Angus advises that there is an important connection between overcoming silence and ending collective exclusion. This is because it is easier to exclude a group that is silent rather than a group that is vocal. For this reason, she refuses to be silent about the

exclusions she has faced in her university experience. Her voice is reflected in her work as she refuses to be silent about oppression and she refuses to take herself out of her writing.

### **Geography**

As noted earlier, the issue of geography is another barrier faced by Aboriginal students who have to relocate to attend university. For example, Monture-Angus (2003) asserts that “access to university education requires the willingness to leave your community, your people, your way of life and all that feels comfortable” (p. 41). Further, she points out that while non-Aboriginal students also may leave their home community to pursue postsecondary studies, they are not leaving behind their culture and traditions. This is something that is specific to Aboriginal students as postsecondary education is not typically offered in Aboriginal communities. While there have been developments in distance education, students continue to have more options off-reserve.

### **Language**

The lack of Aboriginal languages in university institutions is another barrier faced by Aboriginal women. Battiste (1998) demonstrates why Indigenous languages are crucial to Indigenous ways of being:

Indigenous languages offer not just a communication tool for unlocking knowledge; they offer a process of orientation that removes us from rigid noun-centered reality and offers an unfolding paradigmatic process for restoration and healing. It reflects a reality of transformation and change in its holistic representations and processes that stress interaction, reciprocity, respect, and non-interference. (p. 24)

Battiste (1998) also asserts that “language loss is not purely linguistic; it involves more than just sounds, but involves socialization of language and knowledge, ways of knowing, nonverbal and verbal communication, and these processes are not easily dissolved” (p. 25). Monture-Angus (2003) asserts that there is a lack of language courses offered in universities. This is a failure to recognize the literature that links language to culture and language to positive self-identities. For example, Cherubini and Hodson (2008) maintain that Aboriginal languages are essential to Aboriginal self-identity. Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, and Galvan (2008) also tie language to student identity and self-esteem; they also demonstrate that language and culture are inextricably linked:

The need for language revitalization is an imperative for many who argue that Indigenous knowledge is embedded in the terms, subtle understandings, ways of talking, and histories inherent in language. Furthermore, something is irretrievably lost when language is not expressed in and through Native culture. Culture is more than just beliefs and behaviours; it is also epistemology, the unique understandings of which can only be expressed through language specific to Indigenous worldviews. (p. 337)

This demonstrates the importance of language and the implications of the lack of Aboriginal languages in university.

Monture-Angus (1995) speaks about her struggles with being forced to express Aboriginal ideas in the English language (p. 2). She maintains that Aboriginal scholars have to find ways to share Aboriginal ideas through the English language:

We have taken a language that does not speak for us and given it a new life.

Perhaps, we break all of the structural, style and grammatical rules. But we have

learned to use a language that was forced upon us to create powerful messages that convey to you our experience. (p. 34)

Today, Aboriginal students are no longer forbidden to speak their own language, but they seldom can use it in their academic work, and are expected to find ways to express their own ideas in the English language. Further, Kenny (2006) asserts that standard academic language can be alienating. This limits who has access to scholarly sources (Monture-Angus, 1995). This speaks to the need for universities to honour the inclusion of Aboriginal languages within course and program offerings. Further, it reveals the need for the use of accessible language of scholarly materials along with language enrichment courses.

### **Aboriginal Approaches to Learning**

Doige (2003) discusses the differences between Aboriginal approaches to learning and mainstream approaches to learning. She asserts that while Aboriginal knowledge is deeply spiritual, mainstream understandings are secular. This dissimilarity is problematic for Aboriginal learners because the identity of many Aboriginal students is grounded in spirituality and understandings about interconnected relationships with the land and all of creation. Mainstream epistemologies impose an approach to learning that is inconsistent with Aboriginal traditions of spirituality, holism, and learning that is connected to the land. Monture-Angus (1995) maintains that learning in an Aboriginal way involves spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects. For Aboriginal learners, knowledge involving only the mind is incomplete. This demonstrates that facilitating Aboriginal learning must include recognition of spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects of learning (p. 84). These approaches to learning must be



accommodated, accepted, and embraced. Educators must be enlightened regarding Aboriginal approaches to learning so that the education of Aboriginal students may become inclusive and harmonious of Aboriginal knowledge and ways of understanding. As Hodson and Manley-Casimir (2008) advocate, understandings of Aboriginal learning styles must occur in teacher education.

### **Exploring an Aboriginal Teaching Model**

If Eurocentrism is the most prevalent and difficult barrier to overcome—the core barrier from which other barriers stem—then it makes sense to implement a teaching model that addresses this barrier first and in doing so addresses the other barriers that stem from it. Graveline (1998) provides a useful model for addressing Eurocentrism in *Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness*. In this book she offers an Aboriginal teaching model for enacting change in the classroom. She uses the Medicine Wheel paradigm to develop a model that is holistic and representative of the interconnectedness of all relations by drawing on the four directions of the Medicine Wheel: East, South, West, and North. The first component of this model is *The Eastern Door: Challenging Eurocentric Consciousness*. This component informs us of the importance of awareness in resistance and change. Graveline asserts that:

consciousness-raising is an educational and healing model that focuses on the sharing of personal feelings, attitudes and behaviours to gain a deeper understanding of the collective reality produced through societal conditions.

Through consciousness-raising, participants learn how to use their own “personal” experience as a starting point for individual and/or “political” change. (p. 89)

The second component, *The Southern Door: Introducing Aboriginal Spirituality into the Classroom* discusses how Aboriginal spirituality can be brought into the classroom. This is important because Aboriginal knowledge and ways of being are deeply spiritual. She talks about the importance of ‘Talking Circles’ and ‘First Voice’ in learning and healing. These methods allow students to speak from the heart and open up about deeper issues through reflection and communication. This is also a part of understanding one’s own identity and how one is connected within the circle and the learning institution as a whole. *The Western Door: Building Community Inside and Outside the Classroom* emphasizes the importance of ‘Sharing Stories’ and ‘Sharing Feelings.’ She advises that it is important to speak out about the emotional impact of our education experiences, and to speak out about the pain. Telling our stories of racism and oppression allows for a connection between these experiences and the social realities that lead to these experiences. In *The Northern Door: Enacting Change*, she advises that ‘Collectivism’ and ‘Breaking the Silence’ are essential to making change. Further, she maintains that “we can actively resist acculturation through Aboriginal pedagogy” (p. 191). This teaching model serves as a resistance to the Eurocentric pedagogy that exists as a barrier for Aboriginal students. As a response to those barriers it is useful in conceptualizing a vision of Aboriginal women’s access to and success within university.

### **Responding to the Unique and Specific Needs of Aboriginal Women**

A vision of Aboriginal women’s access to and success within universities must respond to the unique and specific needs of Aboriginal women. Drawing on her research for the Status of Women Canada report entitled, *North American Indian, Métis, and Inuit Women Speak about Culture, Education, and Work* (2002) Kenny (2006) made a number

of policy recommendations to address the specific needs of Aboriginal women in order to make their participation in education, work, and Canadian society as a whole accessible. The following includes those recommendations from the report that are most relevant for a university access program for Aboriginal women:

9. Design and implement policies that guarantee childcare for Aboriginal women who are attempting to upgrade their education or participate in the workforce and policies that are respectful to children by giving Mothers leave when necessary for the care of their children.

10. Design and implement policies that ensure culturally appropriate curricula, pedagogy, and consultation in educational settings. These policies must reflect the *Indian Control of Indian Education* [published by the National Indian Brotherhood 1972].

12. Design and implement institutional policies in work and educational settings that require administrators and employees to take training in cultural sensitivity and policies to guarantee culturally appropriate delivery of services to Aboriginal peoples.

13. Design and implement language immersion programs in regions where Aboriginal people are trying to maintain and revitalize their language.

15. Design and implement policies to increase Aboriginal women's access to knowledge of their employment rights through educational seminars, workshops, and media.

16. Design and implement policies at all government levels, including band councils which would support the development of Aboriginal women for spiritual

and cultural growth and advancement of academic education and training.

Education and training must be flexible in delivery. Institute mentoring processes in education and work settings. (pp. 556-557)

The above recommendations address some of the barriers that have been discussed in this chapter and are useful to a vision of Aboriginal women's access to and success within universities. A final consideration in the development of an access program for Aboriginal women is examining the reasons why Aboriginal women choose to pursue postsecondary studies. Monture-Angus (1995) asserts that these reasons are different than the reasons why other students attend university. Battiste (1998) advises that Aboriginal students are looking to liberate themselves through education, and to heal Aboriginal communities. In consideration of these reasons, part of an access program should be to rebuild, heal, recover, and restore healthy relationships (Battiste, 1998) and to provide meaningful education experiences (Monture-Angus, 1995).

### **Aboriginal Motherhood: Educational Experiences and Opportunity**

As many Aboriginal women in education are Mothers of young children, this chapter would not be complete without dedicating a section to the experiences of Aboriginal women as both Mothers and students. An understanding of Aboriginal Mothering and the experiences of Aboriginal women in education with respect to their identities as Mothers, is integral to a vision of Aboriginal women's access to and success within university. My own position as an Aboriginal Mother allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal women as they journey toward the reclaiming and revisioning of traditional Mothering practices. As such, I put this section forth as a way to assist in building an understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal

women as Mothers so that the university can embrace their roles in caring for the future generation of the Aboriginal community.

### **Understanding the Trope Associated with Aboriginal Mothering**

As part of my course requirements, I submitted a reflection piece on Anderson's (2007) article, *Giving Life to the People: an Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood*. In this article Anderson discusses the reclamation of an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood. The main focus of the course was maternal pedagogy; so, I put forth the idea that an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood would be beneficial to a maternal pedagogy. In response, my professor provided the following comment:

The difficult thing will be to set up this view in contrast to the dominant scary view of Aboriginal Mothers beset by being responsible for a generation of children suffering from, say, fetal alcohol syndrome. How do you shatter that trope?

At first, I was concerned with this comment. Surely there is a stigmatization attached to being a young Aboriginal Mother and I have to learn to live through this stigmatization everyday as I balance the roles I carry as a young Aboriginal Mother. However, I come from a community where "children are the hearts of our nations" and where I feel my position as a young Aboriginal Mother is always welcomed and embraced. My professor's comment prompted me to reflect on this further. This brought me to Anderson's (2003) article, *Vital Signs: Reading Colonialism in Contemporary Adolescent Family Planning*. Anderson begins this article with the following:

*Children Are the Hearts of Our Nations* and *Our Children Are Our Future* are familiar sayings that adorn Aboriginal organizational logos and letterhead, T-

shirts and bumper stickers. We adopt these sayings as powwow or conference themes and print them on banners to welcome participants. But after the meetings, the speeches and the MC's platitudes at the powwow, where do our children really stand? If children are the heart of our communities, I think we need to take a serious look at our heart condition. (p. 173)

Throughout the article, Anderson draws attention to the crisis that Aboriginal families face as our families are becoming younger and larger with limited economic resources and a lack of the traditional family practices that were prevalent at a time when sayings like "children are the hearts of our nations" originated.

Aboriginal families in Canada today may be described as being younger and larger than non-Aboriginal families. Characteristics of the Aboriginal family include younger parents, single parents, lower incomes, and larger families (Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2002). As noted earlier, one in three Aboriginal women who are Mothers are single Mothers, and the average annual income of single Aboriginal Mothers is less than \$16, 000. Further, one third of these Mothers are raising three or more children (Anderson, 2007).

While the above statistics on the Aboriginal family may be troubling, the rates of adolescent pregnancies in Aboriginal communities are even more alarming. In fact, the high rates of teen pregnancy in Aboriginal communities have been referred to as a crisis leading to child and youth poverty. It is estimated that girls under the age of 15 are becoming pregnant at rates that are 18 times as high as those of the general teen population of Canada (Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2002). The prevalent rates of teen pregnancy among Aboriginal communities are troubling because

they are accompanied with low educational achievement, underemployment, and reliance on social assistance. Further, pregnancy complications and negative health consequences of both Mother and child are more probable in adolescent pregnancies. Big Eagle and Guimond (2009) assert that teen fertility rates implicate the entire community and that there is a negative association among high fertility rates and community well-being. The complexities associated with early Motherhood among Aboriginal women/girls have been captured in the following statement:

Early Motherhood increases the vulnerability of a First Nations woman who is already disadvantaged socio-economically by reason of her cultural background and gender. She is at greater risk of academic underachievement, reduced employability, single parenthood, and an increased dependence on income assistance. The combined effect of early Motherhood and cultural background is glaring in terms of educational attainment. (p. 55)

There have been conflicting concerns put forth with respect to the discussion on early Motherhood among Aboriginal youth. According to Big Eagle and Guimond, high fertility rates among teens may perpetuate poor economic conditions among First Nation families. On the other hand, some view early pregnancy as traditional. There are also strong held views among some that inquiry into these personal matters is intrusive, especially if the intervention is coming from mainstream sources (Big Eagle & Guimond, 2009).

This crisis prompted the publication of *Tenuous Connections: Urban Aboriginal Youth Sexual Health and Pregnancy*, a study published by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (2002) to “fully explore the issue of adolescent pregnancy in

the Urban Aboriginal community” (p. 13). According to this report, it is critical that Aboriginal youth pregnancy be explored because 50% of the Aboriginal population is under the age of 25. This means that the future generations of Aboriginal societies will depend on the family planning practices of our Aboriginal youth. The OFIFCs report recommends the implementation of a health promotion strategy to address teen pregnancy and for this strategy to include Elders and traditional teachers. This strategy takes an educative approach towards teen pregnancy involving culturally relevant community-based education for youth and preteens.

The statistics on Aboriginal families in Canada and the accompanying negative implications noted above demonstrate the need for a solution. Anderson (2003) asserts that “Aboriginal children are suffering today because colonization has robbed us of the capacity for building healthy communities, and modern day economic and social policies exacerbate this problem” (p. 174). Further, she maintains that “long-term and recent history plays into the family planning issues among Aboriginal peoples today” (p. 174). The impact that legally sanctioned policies associated with the residential school system, the “sixties scoop,” and the eugenics movement have had on Aboriginal women, children, and communities are reflected in the following statements:

Almost three decades later, the status of Aboriginal women, especially Mothers, has not changed significantly. For Aboriginal women, Motherhood represents a core aspect of a woman’s being and it constitutes a benchmark component of an Aboriginal community’s well-being. Being an Aboriginal Mother involves navigating parenthood under the pervasive, critical glare of the state. The theme that links the state’s past and present treatment of



Aboriginal Mothers involves the non-empirically supported, implicit notion that Aboriginal women are ‘unfit’ parents in need of state observation, guidance and at times intervention. The state has been instrumental in creating a negative stereotype of Aboriginal women as being inherently “inferior” people and “unfit” parents. This stereotype justifies and legitimizes the state’s inappropriate and unjust scrutiny of Aboriginal Mothers. (Cull, 2006, p. 141)

All of these experiences build terror through individual and collective memory, instilling in parents and communities a profound insecurity about children and a fear of further personal loss. More generally, there is a strong awareness that, as peoples, we face ongoing threat of extinction. Aboriginal peoples have recent memory, collective/historic memory and everyday experiences that continue to feed these insecurities. There is always the threat of someone coming to take the children away, someone scheming to erase us permanently. The political, social, emotional and practical response to these issues has been to reproduce in spite of it all. (Anderson, 2003, p. 176)

As Anderson (2003) demonstrates, historical assimilationist policies have served as a real threat of extinction for Aboriginal peoples. In addition, the right for Aboriginal women and communities to parent and educate Aboriginal children continues to be threatened. Therefore, while the very act of reproduction is a risk for any Aboriginal woman, it may also be part of a movement towards regaining control over the right to be both an Aboriginal woman and a Mother.

## **Current Trends in Contemporary Aboriginal Family Planning**

Anderson (2003) asserts that while most risk factors in youth pregnancy cross cultural contexts, there are other risk factors specific to Aboriginal communities that have to do with cultural genocide and a fear that our culture is under the threat of extinction, along with the recent and even current threat of Aboriginal Mothers not being able to parent their own children. Anderson (2003) relates the fear and threat of extinction to the current trends of Aboriginal families being younger and larger by asserting that these attacks on Aboriginal Motherhood may lead, consciously and unconsciously, to the current trends of Aboriginal women having younger and larger families:

It's simple: when a people are under siege, it becomes imperative to reproduce. Aboriginal peoples across Turtle Island have come through wars, slaughter, smallpox, forced relocation, starvation and assimilation. I believe that both conscious and unconscious efforts have been made to keep our families alive by continuing to produce children and replenish the population in times of great loss. If efforts like this hadn't been made, it is possible that I wouldn't be sitting here today. (p. 175)

Moreover, Anderson (2003) maintains that cultural misunderstandings may also influence the younger and larger trends of Aboriginal families. For example, Aboriginal peoples have spiritual understandings about children as “the hearts of our nations” and it is understood to be part of a woman's role to have and nurture the future generations. Anderson (2003) asserts that European influence may have altered understandings of what that really meant. While some may take this to mean that Aboriginal women had

lots of children, what it really meant was that Aboriginal women were “responsible people and we loved our children, we never had more than we could look after” (Maria Campell, a Cree/Métis woman, cited in Anderson, 2003, p. 178).

In addition, the dominant views about sexuality also play a role in the reproductive practices of young Aboriginal women. Anderson (2003) asserts that the sexual repression and the sexual abuse that was introduced to Aboriginal children in residential schools have affected Aboriginal family planning. She advises that, “Christianity condemned traditional understandings of sex as a natural part of life and introduced the dichotomy of the virgin and whore as the only options for women’s sexuality” (p. 181). Thus, the suppression of traditional understandings about sexuality and reproduction also affect Aboriginal reproductive practices.

The above demonstrates that the risk factors of teen pregnancy are different for Aboriginal youth than for non-Aboriginal youth. Further, it demonstrates the distinct cultural underpinnings of current Aboriginal family trends. Thus, a resolution to these family planning issues must reflect these distinct differences (Anderson, 2003).

Solutions towards positive family planning in Aboriginal families are embedded in the reclamation of an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood. For example, Anderson (2003) advises that traditionally Aboriginal women were responsible for controlling family size and not having more children than they could care for. She demonstrates that family planning was important in Aboriginal societies. Anderson (2003) maintains that there was extensive knowledge about women’s health and the older women supported younger women in family planning decisions:

At one time, there were systems and ceremonies in place that allowed older women to pass on their knowledge of women's bodies and cycles. Young girls were taken to ceremonies and guided through rites at puberty where they learned about sex, pregnancy and parenting—as well as about work expectations and other adult responsibilities—from community Aunties and grannies. They also learned how their bodies were connected to the cycles of the land and the sky world, as menstruation and fertility patterns could be measured according to the cycles of the moon. (p. 179)

In addition, Anderson (2003) maintains that historically traditional medicines were used as forms of birth control. For example, teas were used as a daily contraceptive method and there were medicines that could bring on menstruation if a woman missed her cycle. Much of this knowledge of traditional birth control has been lost as a result of assimilation. Anderson (2003) writes that:

This once commonplace knowledge has been attacked and suppressed to the point that it is now hard to find. It was replaced by Christian morals and a western medical paradigm that gave birth, pregnancy and female sexual and reproductive health matters over to male doctors. (p. 181)

This means that young Aboriginal women do not have access to these traditions and ceremonies to help them make positive decisions about sex and responsible family planning. Reproductive information is now for the most part left in the hands of White male doctors who were historically instrumental in the nonconsensual sterilization of young Aboriginal women through the eugenics movement. Indeed, seeking the medical advice of these practitioners would be uncomfortable for most Aboriginal women, which

may also contribute to teen pregnancy rates. This speaks to the need of reclaiming an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood as a solution towards healthy family planning practices. Moreover, it provides an educational opportunity for traditional family planning practices.

### **Reclaiming an Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood**

In *Giving Life to the People: an Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood*, Anderson (2007) discusses an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood by mapping out what Motherhood looked like in Aboriginal societies prior to European contact. Below is a description of the way labour was divided among men and women whose roles were considered to be complementary in nature:

These economies involved gendered roles in which men were responsible for hunting, fishing and trapping, and women were responsible for refining the products of men's labour (i.e., preparing meats and tanning hides), for harvesting, farming and hunting or trapping smaller animals. The "separate spheres" of traditional Native economies could not have been characterized by the public/private dichotomy, nor were they hierarchical or inherently oppressive to one gender. They were understood to be interdependent, equally valuable, and flexible. In land based economies women were recognized for their productive as well as their reproductive labour. (pp. 762-763)

Empowered Mothering strategies of an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood are embedded in a restoration of "the gendered roles and responsibilities that came from a time when Native Motherhood signified authority" (p. 775).

Community leadership was very women centered in Aboriginal communities. Patriarchal influences and the subjugation of Aboriginal women under the Indian Act have shifted these leadership roles of women. Anderson (2007) points out that the reclamation of an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood involves the restoration of women's leadership roles. Restoring these roles to women in Aboriginal communities is critical to the healing of our Nations. Thus, "giving life to the people" is also about a responsibility to the community in which women become the "life-givers" of the community through leadership and development.

Anderson (2007) also describes Indigenous ideologies of Motherhood as being grounded in spirituality. She asserts that the maternal body is a metaphor for power. Further, the female body and the ability for women to procreate is linked to the power of creation and the ability of Mother Earth to sustain life. Anderson (2007) maintains that coming back to these spiritual views of women and creation is empowering for Aboriginal women. The return to these traditions and spiritual ceremonies will give young women the values and ideals to make positive and responsible decisions about sex and reproduction. This is evident in *Tenuous Connections: Urban Aboriginal Youth Sexual Health and Pregnancy* as the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (2002) found that adolescents who identified with Native spirituality were less likely to become pregnant. Thus, reclaiming these spiritual views will heal Aboriginal communities through the empowerment of Aboriginal women.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres' (2002) study *Tenuous Connections: Urban Aboriginal Youth Sexual Health and Pregnancy* found that Aboriginal youth are lacking in the cultural traditions surrounding sex and sexuality. In

fact, 35% of the participants in that study indicated that they think Elders and cultural teachings about sex and sexuality would encourage positive and informed family planning decisions. Thus, returning to these traditional family planning teachings may help to prevent unplanned pregnancies and support informed decisions about sex, sexuality, and reproduction. Indeed, there is a need for our youth to be learning these teachings about Aboriginal family planning. The following descriptions of the Berry Fast, a ceremony conducted by young girls as they enter into womanhood, validate the need to return to these ceremonies as a way to encourage positive family planning choices in Aboriginal communities:

It is significant that the Berry Fast grounds this sense of responsibility in Aboriginal notions of womanhood. As the Berry Fast is a gendered puberty rite, it validates the girls' existence not only as Native people nor as women, but as *Native women*. It allows them to see the critical role they play in creation, and this is achieved through the telling of female-centered Creation Stories, through the teachings about the sacredness of the berry, through the celebration of their menstruation....The Berry Fast teachings can thus help girls to honour their particular abilities to create, and to make the connection to an understanding of their central role in shaping the future of our nations. (Anderson, 2000a, p. 390)

While the Berry Fast ceremony has been lost through colonization, Anderson (2000a) asserts that it is making a comeback in Aboriginal communities through reclamation of an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood. Further, she indicates that it is

now being offered in a way that reflects the contemporary needs of Aboriginal youth. She maintains that:

The Berry Fast offers an opportunity time for girls to reflect on sex, sexuality, and relationships. The restrictions on dating and dancing are helpful because they suggest to girls that they don't need to build everything around a male partner, nor do they need to think of themselves in a sexual way all the time.

(p. 391)

This example demonstrates a revisioning of traditional Aboriginal ceremonies as a way to address the distinct needs of Aboriginal youth. Anderson (2000a) advises that through these ceremonies young women learn about patience, sacrifice, and taking the time to learn about and build relationships. She also demonstrates how the Berry Fast is helping women to learn about respecting their bodies. Through empowerment, the Berry Fast allows women to learn about how to say no and withdraw from unhealthy situations. Sacrifice, self-discipline, and a sense of responsibility are also lessons that young women learn by participating in the Berry Fast.

Anderson (2007) advises that we must think critically about ideologies of Indigenous Motherhood. Today, many Aboriginal women are raising their families on their own without the help and support of the community. Moreover, many of these women are raising young families in urban settings where traditional supports are not readily accessible.

### **Reclaiming Traditional Mothering Practices: An Educational Opportunity**

Evidently, the current trends of Aboriginal families indicate a shift away from the traditional family planning strategies that guided “giving life” to the future generations at



a time when an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood prevailed. Demographically, Aboriginal Mothers are young and many are single. This trend calls for the need of increased educational opportunities of young Aboriginal Mothers. The ideas put forth in this section have demonstrated that healing the Nations begins with increased educational opportunities for Aboriginal Mothers who are the first teachers of the future generation. By reclaiming and a revisioning an Indigenous ideology of Motherhood, through the restoration of women's leadership roles, and the reclamation of family planning traditions and ceremonies, such as the Berry Fast, we will be able to restore the healthy Nations that once prevailed at a time when Aboriginal women were revered for their roles as Mothers (Cull, 2006, p. 142). This presents an empowering educational opportunity for young Aboriginal women. As many Aboriginal women are postsecondary pursuing education as a way to contribute to the well-being of their children and their communities, reclaiming these traditions into their educational experiences will assist them in achieving their goals. It will allow them to blend their experiences of schooling and Mothering, tasks that were rendered incompatible under residential school programs. This will not only enhance the educational experiences of Aboriginal women but it will also promote the healing of Aboriginal families, communities, and nations.

### **A Personal Experience**

As I was struggling to complete this work, I had the opportunity to participate in my first Full Moon Ceremony. During this ceremony, I received an oral teaching about the Berry Fast. This was very important for me because this experience validated much of what I have been reading about the empowerment that comes from participation in these ceremonies. As I continue on my journey, I intend to continue participating in ceremony

and learning about the traditional family practices embedded in my culture. This will guide me as I contribute to the emerging literature on the experiences of Aboriginal women in education and work to shatter the tropes of Aboriginal Mothering as identified by my professor. It will also guide me as I Mother my own children, honour them as gifts from the Creator, and instill in them a strong Aboriginal identity. I believe that through an access program designed to meet the holistic and familial needs of Aboriginal women, the university can embrace these women as they reclaim their traditional Mothering practices and support the interconnected relationships between women and their children.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion has served as a review of the literature that demonstrates the barriers that Aboriginal women face in universities. Through a demographic overview of the current realities of Aboriginal women and a historical and sociocultural analysis of these current realities, I have contextualized the experiences of Aboriginal women as they journey through their university experiences. The barriers Aboriginal women face throughout these journeys speak to the need for an access program that will respond to the needs of Aboriginal women and their children. My vision of an access program that addresses the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their children is one that will embrace the historical, cultural, and social realities of Aboriginal women as they learn to shuffle through an empowering education program in which Aboriginal languages, cultures, and traditions are core components. Finally, I have explored the experiences of early Motherhood among Aboriginal women and positioned this as an educative opportunity that promotes the healing of Aboriginal families, communities, and nations.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I cannot begin to discuss the research method utilized in this project without first providing the reader with an explanation of the overarching context in which research and research methodology exists and is viewed within Indigenous communities. There are many tensions surrounding research proceedings involving Indigenous peoples and communities that stimulate tensions, suspicions, and, in some cases, anger; hence, there is a need for Indigenous authority. As a result, the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics' (2009) *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS)*, which is a joint policy of three federal funding agencies including the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, has designated a section, *Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, in the draft of its second edition. This section:

Acknowledges the unique status of Aboriginal people in Canada. It interprets how the value of respect for human dignity and the core principles of respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice...apply to research involving Aboriginal peoples. It accords respect to Indigenous knowledge systems by ensuring that distinct worldviews are represented wherever possible in planning and decision-making, from the earliest stages of conception and design of projects through to analysis and dissemination of results. It affirms Aboriginal rights, interests and responsibilities as reflected in community customs and codes of research practice in order to better ensure balance in the relationship between researchers and participants and mutual benefit in researcher-community relations. (Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics, 2009, p. 91)

The Research Ethics Board of Brock University is committed to adhering to the aforementioned policy section through the Aboriginal Research Advisory Circle, which contributes to reviews of all applications for ethical clearance involving research with Aboriginal peoples.

In light of the multifaceted issues associated with research involving Aboriginal peoples, I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first set of sections allows for a thorough understanding of the context in which research is situated within Indigenous communities, and, more specifically, the considerations applicable to research amongst Aboriginal women. This includes the following sections: The Movement Towards Indigenous Research Methodology, Naming the Challenge, Redefining the So-Called “Indian Problem,” Holistic Approaches to Aboriginal Research, and Qualitative Research: The Importance of Aboriginal Women’s Stories. Once I have established this foundation of understanding in which this research project is positioned, I will then discuss the specific research methods I adopted for this thesis in the following sections: The Research Design and Implementation, Selection of Participants, The Wildfire Gatherings, Data Analysis, Methodological Assumptions, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations.

### **The Movement Towards Indigenous Methodology**

Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) book entitled, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*, “situates research in a much larger historical, political and cultural context” (p. 6). Historically, western research on Indigenous people has been tied to imperialism, the invasion and control of Indigenous peoples and their homelands, and their subsequent exploitation and subjugation. Since the time of European contact,

western research has been used to define the histories, practices, and ways of being of Indigenous peoples. Through distortions of lived experiences, research from outside these civilizations has been used to justify the control of Indigenous peoples. In the present day, outsider research is used to define the “Indian problem,” ensuing justification of the control of Indigenous peoples. The Indian Act serves as a contemporary example of this control as it governs all aspects of life for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Smith argues that through “researching back,” a process of decolonizing research methodologies, research can shift from being about Indigenous people to being for Indigenous people. Smith explains this process of “researching back” in the introduction of her book:

Part of the project of this book is ‘researching back’, in the same tradition of ‘writing back’ or ‘talking back’, that characterizes much of the post-colonial or anti-colonial literature. It has involved a ‘knowingness of the colonizer’ and a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination. (p. 7)

While western research on Indigenous peoples has mostly been about the ‘Indigenous problem’ from an outsider’s perspective, Indigenous research methodology brings the research of Indigenous people back to the community, allowing solutions to emerge from an insider perspective (Porsanger, 2004; Smith, 1999).

To demonstrate the problem with the outsider perspective, Cora Weber-Pillwax (2001) offers a story about an experience she had in her first year at graduate school when she was reading in the anthropology section of the library and came across an article that described the life of a Cree man. While reading the article, Cora became aware that the piece was about her grandfather and she was overwhelmed by the

misrepresentation that the anthropologist had put forth. She asserts that the translation and interpretation of what her grandfather had said was very inaccurate. She offered this story as an example of how Indigenous people have been objectified through research. Further, she describes her experience of coming across this article of her grandfather as one of humiliation, shock, and pain (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). It is an example of how, as Aboriginal peoples, we have had our own histories told by outsiders, and have then become outsiders in our own histories. As we read, hear, and see the misrepresentations of our lives retold from this outsider perspective, we become alienated from our own experiences. Smith (1999) connects these painful experiences to the relationship between research and Indigenous communities in the following excerpt:

The term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that Indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity....It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed

those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (p. 1)

Smith (1999) demonstrates how research has been used as a tool of colonialism and has left a very painful legacy with Indigenous communities. She argues that an Indigenous research methodology is needed because our stories have been untold and misrepresented for far too long. Smith's work, along with the work of other Indigenous scholars, has led to the recent movement towards Indigenous people having more control over their own research.

Shawn Wilson (2003) refers to the period of 1990-2000 as the Recent Aboriginal Research Phase. This is described as a time when the voices of Indigenous scholars began to emerge through a refusal of having non-Indigenous researchers speak for them. During this time, Indigenous scholars have begun to draw on Indigenous perspectives to have their realities heard (p. 168). Wilson (2003) asserts that we are currently in a new phase; the Indigent Research Phase. As part of this phase, Indigenous scholars have been able to incorporate an Indigenous research perspective into mainstream education. It has only been recently that Indigenous scholars have been able to draw on an Indigenous research paradigm to implement their own research (p. 169).

Engaging Indigenous research methods involves more than the implementation of research; it involves a deep and thorough understanding of the contexts in which research is situated within the lives of Aboriginal peoples and communities. It is critical to also have a thorough understanding of the historical experiences and the relationship of the community to both western research and Aboriginal research. It is up to the researcher to be cautious and sensitive to any negative experiences or traumas that have resulted from

outsider research on the community. Further, it is up to the researcher to understand that Aboriginal communities and societies have always had their own systems of research. These systems offered a more holistic and balanced approach to dispute resolution where everyone in the community, Elders, men, women, and even children, were involved.

Porsanger (2004) advises that fundamental to Indigenous methodologies is ensuring that research on Indigenous issues is done in a respectful, ethical, correct, and sympathetic way that is useful and beneficial to the Indigenous community. In addition, she maintains that Indigenous methodology is based on a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched where the principles of respect, reciprocity, and feedback are honoured (p. 108). Furthermore, it is important that the community being researched has an important role to play in the research. By honouring these principles, we can move away from the trend of research being done *on* Indigenous communities to research being done *with* Indigenous communities. It is important that the community being researched has a central role in the research project and the research must be aimed at the betterment of the community as opposed to the betterment of the researcher. In short, it must be tied to the community (Weber-Pillwax, 2001).

Shawn Wilson (2001) points out that there is a need for an Indigenous paradigm because an Indigenous worldview is missing from mainstream paradigms. He discusses the different ways in which knowledge is viewed. In the mainstream, knowledge is an individual entity. The researcher searches for knowledge and in this way knowledge is gained through research and owned by the researcher. In contrast, from an Indigenous perspective, knowledge is relational. It is not owned by one individual; rather, it is shared and relational with all of creation. Wilson (2001) also discusses the need for intuitive



learning and spiritual considerations as part of an Indigenous paradigm (p. 178).

Additionally, Graveline (2000) speaks to the importance of honouring the interconnectedness of all and balancing the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions of the Medicine Wheel framework. An Indigenous paradigm must incorporate these components of Indigenous knowledge (Wilson, 2001).

As noted earlier, Wilson (2003) maintains that we are currently in an Indigent Research Phase meaning that for the first time Indigenous scholars are able to articulate an Indigenous research paradigm that utilizes Indigenous approaches to research and culturally appropriate data collection methods. This allows me the opportunity to conduct this research through an emerging Indigenous research paradigm: The Wildfire Gathering Research Method. This is an Indigenous research method that was first used in 1999 in the development of a Bachelor of Education in Aboriginal Adult Education Degree Program (ABADED) at Brock University (Kompf & Hodson, 2000). During this Gathering, 25 individuals participated, including members of the local Aboriginal community along with members of the Brock University community. This first Wildfire Gathering took place at the Wildfire Outdoor Education Centre outside Midland, Ontario, and this is where the name The Wildfire Gathering originated.

To offer an understanding of this Indigenous Research Method, I will describe three significant elements that characterize the Wildfire Gathering. First, the Wildfire Gathering is spiritually based and vision driven. Culturally appropriate ceremony is performed and the aspects of the Medicine Wheel framework are incorporated. An Elder, researcher, and research participants come together to share in a common vision or to come to a built consensus (Kompf & Hodson, 2000). Second, a Wildfire Gathering

adopts elements of a traditional Talking Circle in that there is respect for everyone's voice and, for this reason, individuals may speak for as long as they need to. There is also a traditional understanding that "what is said in the circle stays in the circle" and that participants may talk freely and openly without any fear of judgment. This allows for a deeper level of trust. Third, the Wildfire Gathering is based on the premise that all participants are equal. Therefore, the power relations that exist in focus groups between the researcher and the participants are nonexistent in the Wildfire Gathering (J. Hodson, personal communication, November, 2008).

### **Naming the Challenge**

Implementing Indigenous Research Methodology within the confines of mainstream education is a difficult task that raises both limitations and contradictions for the researcher. It was important that I was cautious of these in my implementation of the Wildfire Gathering. I have explored these complexities by examining the work of other scholars engaged in Indigenous research.

Celia Haig-Brown (2003) examines the use of Testimonio as research methodology "beginning with a mutual understanding of the testimonio as a politically and pedagogically conscious, counter-hegemonic, educational research tool" as a way to tell the life history of the Testimonialist (p. 422). Testimonio, a research method that derives from Latin American Studies, documents the experiences of oppressed groups through personal narratives and uses these narratives to expose the impact of social injustices on their lived experiences (Huber, 2009). Through her research, Haig-Brown used interview conversations to develop a form of Testimonio, finding that "the

interviews lacked the complexity, especially the inner beauty and warrior strength, of the person and the situation [she] had come to know” (p. 427).

The above example demonstrates the limitations that arise when one attempts to fit an Indigenous paradigm into a mainstream paradigm. Evidently, researchers engaging in Indigenous research methodology are forced to negotiate their way through these tensions as they are faced with the stipulations associated with what is deemed “acceptable research” in the realm of academia. The following example demonstrates this need for acceptance and understanding of Indigenous ways of doing research:

As I walked out of a meeting with a colleague in my department, she asked me what the focus of my latest research project was about. I took a moment, thinking in my mind, *here we go again*. I drew in a breath, exhaled, and began describing my research focus on the educational experiences of undocumented Chicana college students attending a research university....I explained to her that it was a qualitative study and described my use of Latina/o critical race theory and *testimonio*, where each of the Chicana women have shared with me how race, gender, class and immigration status have emerged in their educational trajectories....She asked several follow-up questions about issues of sampling, reliability and validity tests and finally ended her inquiries by casually offering her condescending advice, *well, you know, you have to be careful, you can't just make-up your own method*. (Huber, 2009, p. 639)

Huber (2009) indicates that she shares this personal story from a “place of frustration,” noting that her colleague’s comments are “reflective of the academy’s perspective on work that challenges traditional research paradigms and the ideologies that

these paradigms produce” (p. 640). As an emerging Aboriginal researcher employing an Indigenous Research Method, I myself am faced with these same interrogations and related frustrations as I consistently need to validate my research topic and my research methodology.

Kovach (2005) asserts that Indigenous research methodology does not easily fit in with mainstream, rather “universities have long claimed a monopoly in defining what counts as knowledge” (p. 21). This conundrum along with the need to secure Aboriginal support in light of the negative associations that come with the term “research” in Aboriginal communities, makes the task of *doing research* a very strenuous, but also rewarding (in its effort towards community betterment), endeavour for Aboriginal scholars:

Written language adds additional complexity in transmitting Indigenous ways of knowing, given that most Indigenous cultures are oral. Even storytelling, an important research method used in Indigenous research, loses a level of meaning in the translation into written script...Indigenous epistemology is fluid, non-linear, and relational. Knowledge is transmitted through stories that shape shift in relation to the wisdom of the storyteller at the time of the telling. The additional task of delivering knowledge in 12-point font, cerlox-bound, written research reports is a little difficult, not the least of which are the frequent pauses from literature reviews, coding and analysis to ask: What *exactly* am I doing? Why do I feel so antsy? Am I helping? For the Indigenous researcher, incorporating Indigenous epistemology into a non-Indigenous language with all that it implies is

complex. It is a troublesome task of criss-crossing cultural epistemologies.

(Kovach, 2005, p. 27)

Indeed, researchers engaging in Indigenous research face numerous challenges in finding acceptance from both mainstream and Aboriginal communities. The added pressure of ensuring the research is making a significant benefit to the community and is also presented in a way that reflects academic language makes Indigenous research exceedingly challenging.

Graveline (2000) advises that attempting to fit an Indigenous worldview into a mainstream paradigm creates a number of contradictions that one needs to be cautious about when using Indigenous research methodology. Through her unique writing style of narrative poetry, she puts forth her views on Circle methodology by highlighting the contradictions that arise when trying to fit this method into the mainstream. I discuss these needs and demonstrate how Indigenous researchers may negotiate their way through these tensions by exploring the work of one researcher who employs the Wildfire Gathering Research Method in his research and reflecting on the ways in which I address these contradictions in my own work.

Graveline (2000) speaks about the importance of First Voice in Indigenous research and the connection that one has to this research. This connection to research makes the researcher subjective rather than objective. Further, she discusses the sacredness of Circle methodology, the need to respect everyone's voice, and reminds us of the importance of patience as Circles are traditionally not constricted to time restraints. Graveline (2000) identifies some rules to respond to these contradictions and contribute to the adaptability of the Circle methodology in mainstream settings. Her first rule is

associated with confidentiality, where all of the participants will be stripped of any identifiers (p. 366). Extra cautions must be taken to assure confidentiality is protected in Aboriginal research settings where the community is small and closely connected. Hodson (2004) used the Wildfire Gathering Research Method in his study of ABADED learners. He ensured that the identities of the research participants were protected by eliminating any descriptions that may make the participant identifiable. Instead, standard demographic information was provided to eliminate any identifiers. Hodson indicates his rationale for this. “Aboriginal communities are very small and everyone knows everyone else. Some of the stories...may place some of the participants at risk of reprisal if they were to be identified” (p. 57). In this statement, Hodson demonstrates that since Aboriginal communities are so small, one must take extra precautions to ensure that participants cannot be identified through descriptive information. Anonymity is something that I have taken extra precautions to ensure as my participants may be easily identified due to the relatively small community size.

Another rule Graveline (2000) identifies is brevity, where she demonstrates the importance of allowing the participants to speak as long as they want, and the importance of not editing out these lengthy quotations. She asserts that it would not be polite or acceptable in Traditional Circles to cut out or eliminate portions of a participant’s contribution (Graveline, 2000, p. 368). Hodson (2004) also describes his rationale for not reducing lengthy quotations of participants:

As often as I could, I have reproduced the words of the Circle in their entirety and because of this the reader may find chapter four to be rather dense or complex.

This approach is culturally appropriate as Elders and other traditional people have

taught me that it is rude to interrupt someone when you have asked for their thoughts on an issue. (p. 65)

In light of the above principle, I have attempted to ensure that I honour the voices of my participants and allow their words to remain in their entirety as culturally appropriate.

Graveline (2000) also speaks to the importance of maintaining the Medicine Wheel as an organizing framework to honour the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of a Circle. Hodson (2004) addressed the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of the participants in his research study by choosing a location that best suited these needs. In addition, culturally relevant ceremonies were completed and tobacco was offered to the participants (p. 59). My Wildfire Gatherings also address these needs by drawing on the Medicine Wheel teachings as an overarching framework for the gathering and honouring each component throughout, by having an Elder to offer spiritual and emotional guidance as needed, and through the choice of location which was most suitable for the participant groups.

Indeed, there are a number of contradictions that arise when Indigenous worldviews are brought into academic research. Through cautious implementation of Indigenous Research Methods, however, an Indigenous worldview can guide academic research with Aboriginal communities. The above examples demonstrate how Indigenous researchers respond to the contradictions that they face when using Indigenous research methodology in mainstream contexts. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how I responded to these contradictions through my own implementation of the Wildfire Gatherings.

### Redefining the So-Called “Indian Problem”

One thing that I need to be conscious of in doing this research is the problematization of Aboriginal women. This is something to which I have given a great deal of consideration in my work with this project. Smith (1999) writes:

The ‘indigenous problem’ is a recurrent theme in all imperial and colonial attempts that deal with Indigenous peoples. It originates within the wider discourses of racism, sexism and other forms of positioning the Other. Its neatness and simplicity gives the term its power and durability. Framing ‘the [Indian] problem’, mapping it, describing it in all its different manifestations, trying to get rid of it, laying blame for it, talking about it, writing newspaper columns about it, drawing cartoons about it, teaching about it, *researching* it, over and over. (pp. 90-91)

While conducting my literature review, I came across a study entitled, *Young Aboriginal Mothers in Winnipeg* (Murdock, 2009), that serves as a good example of a research project that contributes to the problematization of Aboriginal women. This particular study, funded by the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence, focused on the “problem” of young Aboriginal Motherhood “to develop a better understanding of the issues surrounding teen pregnancy among Aboriginal women, in order to adequately respond to the needs of young Aboriginal Mothers through effective policies, programs and practices” (Murdock, 2009, p. i). The 98-page report, however, only included one page of suggestions and a four-page discussion. While the author used the words of the women participants throughout the remainder of the document, they were provided in a way that did not allow for the contextualization of the women’s experiences. Rather, they



appeared as random quotes put forth without explanation and a clear rationale for what was being presented, potentially leaving room for readers to come to their own conclusions of “promiscuity” and “risky behavior” among Aboriginal women, further perpetuating the existing stereotypes of the ‘problem’ of young Aboriginal Mothers. For example, Murdock concludes that “A couple of the women reported alcohol or drugs as a contributing factor to their promiscuous behavior” (p. 30). This conclusion is then followed by a quote from one of the participants to affirm that drugs and alcohol play a big part in who she sleeps with “ninety percent of the time” and that is why this participant claimed to have six children. In addition, distasteful information about the participants sexual behavior was presented in this study that was, in my opinion, unfounded and culturally insensitive. Further, Murdock puts forth concern about the age difference among sexual partners and asks, “Is this behavior something that is unique to Aboriginal culture?” (p. 90). Given the enormity of the racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women in Canada as a result of the magnitude of stereotypes of “promiscuity” embedded in the Canadian consciousness, one must be cautious about such assertions about sexual behavior. As a young Aboriginal Mother myself, I was highly offended by this report!

What stems from these distortions of our real lived experiences is not only a deep rooted perpetuation of the “Indian Problem” among the dominant society, but also a tendency for us to internalize the “Indian Problem” and begin to write about ourselves as if we are the “other.” Smith (1999) cautions us that:

If we write without thinking critically about our writing, it can be dangerous.

Writing can also be dangerous because we reinforce and maintain a style of

discourse that is never innocent. Writing can be dangerous because sometimes we reveal ourselves in ways which can get misappropriated and used against us.

Writing can be dangerous because, by building on previous texts written about Indigenous peoples, we continue to legitimate views about ourselves which are hostile to us. (p. 36)

Smith (1999) raises a good point that one must consider in writing about and in doing research with Aboriginal communities. It is one that I myself must also be conscious about in my writing and in conceptualizing this particular research project; the concern is with the barriers that Aboriginal women face in postsecondary education and the greater picture of promoting accessible education for Aboriginal women as a way to overcome social and economic hardships and to heal families, communities, and, by extension, nations.

I wrote a graduate paper entitled, *Healing Our Nations: Reclaiming and Re-visioning an Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood* (2010). Smith's (1999) warning that writing can be dangerous echoes some of the feedback I was given on the paper. I was advised to ensure that I do not "use the language of the oppressor" in my own work.

Ensuring that I am cautious not to problematize in my writing and research is critical to this project and something to which I am committed. This is, however, a difficult task. As a single Mother of two young boys I can say with confidence that the social and economic realities of my life are indeed problematic! This is not to say that young Aboriginal Motherhood is the problem; rather, it speaks to the greater social and economic barriers of the colonial state in which I exist. It speaks to the lack of familial support that I have as a result of the aftermath of colonization, genocide, and

assimilation. It speaks to the lack of my own exposure to traditional parenting practices and family planning traditions that have been suppressed by the domination of Eurocentric values and beliefs. These are the problems that I must expose and reflect on in doing this work through the stories of those who are most affected.

I must be careful in framing my rationale so that my work is not seen as work that contributes to the problematization of young Aboriginal families. This is a difficult task because it means that I need to go deep into the greater historical, cultural, social, political, and economical contexts in which Aboriginal peoples exist. I must make this explicit in my analyses so that it is understood that I am not searching for a problem within the individual, family, or community. Rather, it must be clear that I am recognizing the greater structural and social issues that create and recreate social and economic hardships for Aboriginal families and that these hardships are the basis for many of the barriers Aboriginal women face in education.

### **Holistic Approaches to Aboriginal Research**

Kenny, Faries, Fiske, & Voyageur (2004) put forth a Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Research Model, which includes:

- honouring past, present and future in interpretive and analytical research processes including historical influences and intergenerational discourse
- honouring the interconnectedness of all life on the Earth and in the community in research design and implementation; and
- honouring the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental aspects of the person and the community in research protocols, methodologies and analyses. (p. 8)

My research project honours the above approaches by first honouring the past, present, and future in all aspects of this project. The traditions of the past that have been suppressed through colonization are viewed as restorative—and this is a principle that is embedded in all stages of my research project and has been since conception. My research design honours the traditions of our past beginning with the Haudenosaunee Creation Story, extending to the present experiences of the participants, and looking forward to the next seven generations. The interconnectedness of all life on Earth and in the community is also honoured in the design and implementation of this project by way of implementing the Wildfire Research Method in a spiritual essence, with traditional openings that acknowledge and give thanks to all of creation, and also by honouring the interconnected relationships of the women as lifegivers, Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, partners, Aunties, and so on. We honour the role our women play in the community and to all of their relations and connectivity to the community. Finally, honouring the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects of the person and the community is integral to the Wildfire Gatherings and to my own journey within this project.

The involvement of the community in all stages of the research project is important to Aboriginal research initiatives (Kenny et al., 2004; Smith 1999). The community has been involved with this research project from inception through ongoing interactions with the community through consultations with the Aboriginal Education Council by way of seeking initial direction and input and by continuing to deliver regular updates. I have also sought out the guidance of a Traditional Knowledge Keeper who has been invaluable in offering cultural support as I approach this work as a decolonizing journey. This support has helped me to ground this research through an understanding of

the past, present, and future within both traditional and modern contexts. In addition, both of the Wildfire Gatherings involved community members from the local urban Aboriginal community as well as the Six Nations community; their involvement as active participants is considered imperative to this project. It is critical that any program development stemming from this project continues to be informed through consistent guidance, direction, and recommendations from the Aboriginal community.

### **Qualitative Research: The Importance of Aboriginal Women's Stories**

The Wildfire Research Method may be referred to as a qualitative research approach because it allows for the in-depth analyses of the participants' narratives. Qualitative research is appropriate for researching the experiences of Aboriginal women because it allows the voices of the women to reveal the meaning of their own experiences (Kenny et al., 2004). It allows for the women to tell their own stories as they live them as opposed to having an outsider draw conclusions from quantitative data. This becomes part of a decolonizing process in which Aboriginal women are empowered to define themselves and have a direct role in designing their own policies and programs (Kenny et al., 2004; Smith, 1999). It allows for a deeper understanding of the multilayered day-to-day realities of Aboriginal women, thus, allowing the women to give voice to their needs. Historically, Aboriginal women's input and direction was integral to policy and development with respect to leadership, community morality, and education (Kenny et al., 2004). As Aboriginal women's stories offer insights on how to reduce suffering, create opportunity, and improve the overall quality of life, their input and direction must continue to be integral to policy and development today. Kenny et al. (2004) describe the importance of women's contributions in this way:

The stories of women are holistic. They include the lives of children and men and their own stories. They include history, the transmission of important cultural knowledge, guidance for character development, ideas about how to generate business, how to keep the spiritual life of the people in order, and how to stay in balance with the forces of the living world. (p. 20)

Qualitative research goes beyond statistical data that offer a limited story into the lives of Aboriginal women, to reveal the real life experiences and expose the interrelated struggles that hinder success as well as the interconnected relations that are needed for Aboriginal women to flourish. The Wildfire Gathering offers a way for these stories to be the driving force behind this research project. It allows Aboriginal women to tell their own stories and to put forth their own solutions.

### **The Research Design and Implementation**

This section describes how I employ an Indigenous research method, The Wildfire Gathering, to explore and understand the experiences of Aboriginal women as they are related to education and education access.

As noted earlier, the Wildfire Gathering is a spiritually based and vision driven research method in which culturally appropriate ceremony is performed and the aspects of the Medicine Wheel framework are incorporated. It involves an Elder who guides the Circle through the offering of opening and closing prayers, smudging ceremonies, and other traditional practices. The strength of this research design is that it allows participants to be involved in a holistic, invitational, and comfortable atmosphere that provides safety and security, and is consistent with Aboriginal teachings and beliefs.

My position as an active participant in this research has, from inception, allowed

for my story to guide the way in which the research plan has extended. In June 2009, one of my first tasks with this project was to write my own educational narrative as a way to identify the barriers that I had faced. While this was an emotionally exhausting task, it was also rejuvenating as it allowed me to reflect on the many hurdles I had overcome throughout my education. This story, which I present in the following chapter, begins by reflecting on my early childhood experiences because it is important to examine early experiences as they have significant impacts on future educational experiences. Our experiences are layered, interconnected, and complex and cannot be thought of in isolation from one another. Early educational experiences affect the way we view the education system and the way we see ourselves in the education system. It is also important to look at experiences that happen outside the education system in our own personal lives because these experiences shape who we are and what we carry with us into the education system.

From this personal narrative, I was able to identify 28 distinctive barriers that I then attempted to fit into a Medicine Wheel framework based on the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical components of an individual. I had difficulty with this approach, however, because the interconnected nature of each barrier or experience made it impossible to fit them into a single component of the Medicine Wheel. Each barrier or experience was related to all of the Medicine Wheel components. The Medicine Wheel teachings, as I have come to understand them, speak to the interconnected nature of each component within the circle. The circle is continuous and ongoing. With this understanding, I was still unable to come up with a comprehensible way to fit my barriers into the Medicine Wheel framework as they were. Instead, I divided the barriers into six

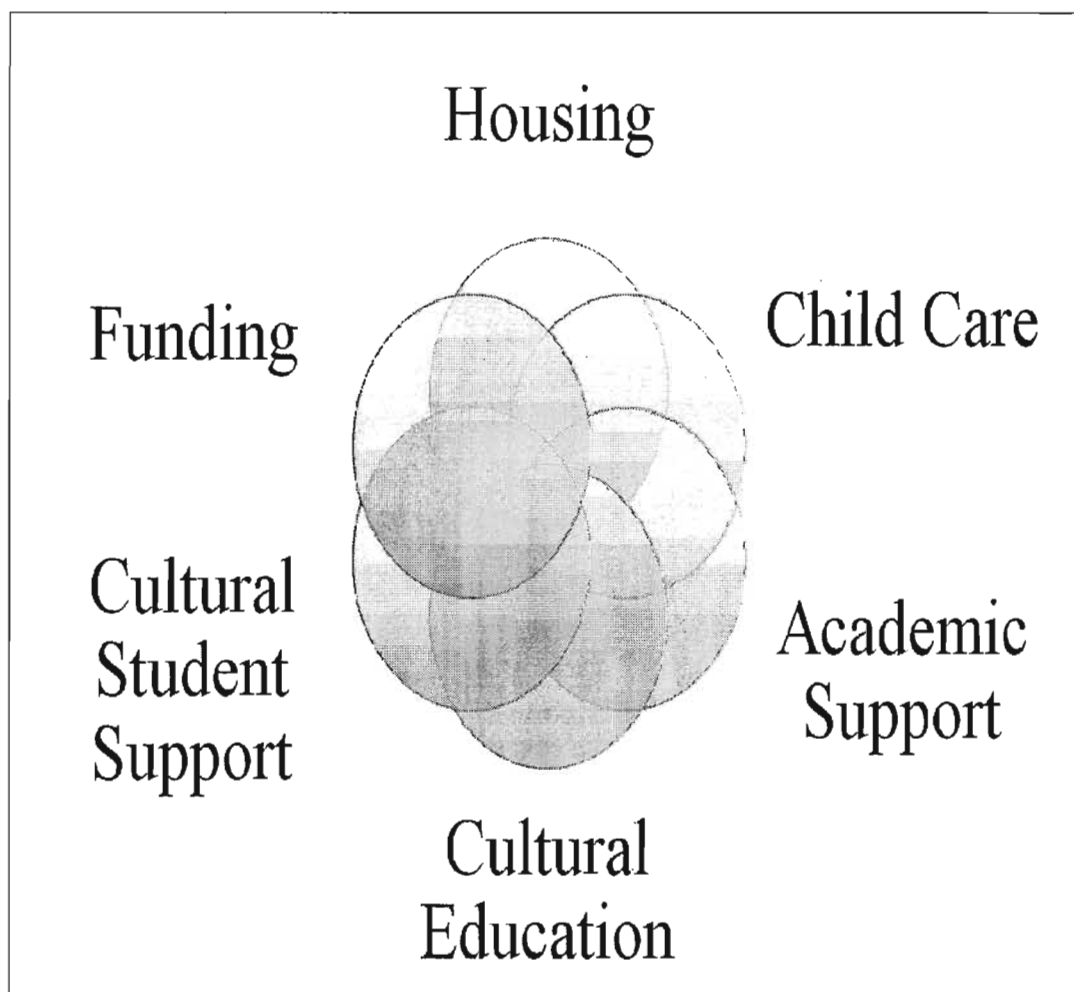
intersecting categories, which I have identified as the six major elements of success for accessible education of Aboriginal women (Figure 2). These six categories allowed me to conceptualize the need for interconnected, rather than fragmented, services that respond to the needs of Aboriginal women. This led to a two-phased Wildfire Research Method involving two participant groups.

### **Selection of Participants**

The two-phased approach entailed two Wildfire Gatherings. The first gathering consisted of 16 participants who were purposefully selected as they identified as “Experts in the Fields” representing the six major elements of success for accessible education of Aboriginal women: Housing, Funding, Childcare, Academic Support, Cultural Education, and Cultural Student Support. This group consisted of 2 Elders, including an Anishnaabee man and a Métis woman who are closely involved in Aboriginal postsecondary education to offer traditional and spiritual guidance, along with a number of prominent leaders from local Aboriginal organizations to ensure that community involvement inform the development of this research. Service providers, including women and men, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, from the above elements of success were also part of this participant group to offer a knowledge exchange on available services and the needs of Aboriginal women in university. The purpose of this first phase was to envision how an access program that meets the needs of young Aboriginal women might look.

The second Wildfire Gathering consisted of 1 Elder, the same Métis woman who participated in Wildfire Gathering 1, to offer traditional and spiritual guidance, along





*Figure 3.* Six intersecting categories that represent the six major elements of success for accessible education for Aboriginal women.

with 4 young Aboriginal women, referred to as the “Experts in their Lives,” who were purposefully selected from the surrounding community. Of these women, 3 were university students and 1 indicated a future goal of pursuing university. These women were selected so that their experiences could inform this research. The strength in this is that the stories came directly from those who actually live the experience and these young women participants were best suited to describe their own experiences and needs.

It was my original intention to recruit more participants for Wildfire Gathering 2; however, the very barriers associated with university access that this study reveals were also barriers to participant recruitment as the numbers of Aboriginal women in university are limited. The small group size served to be more conducive to the in-depth narratives that the women provided. The smaller group size, in comparison to the first gathering, allowed for a more intimate experience that yielded very rich and meaningful data. Their stories are essential to revealing how to reduce barriers and create opportunities that meet the needs of the women, their families, and communities. In this way, not only are they partners and active participants in the research, but they also play a key role in informing the design of an access program to be a holistic response to their realities.

Potential participants for both groups were contacted by telephone and informed in detail of the purpose of the project and the Wildfire Gathering process. At this time, they were also given the proposed date for the Wildfire Gathering. Those participants who indicated interest in participating were sent an information package consisting of a detailed letter of invitation and a consent form. Follow-up calls were made a week after the packages were sent out. This offered an opportunity for any concerns, questions, and clarifications to be addressed. Those individuals who agreed to participate in the project

were asked to give verbal consent at this time. Written consent was sent through the mail by some participants and collected at the start of the Wildfire Gathering for others.

### **The Wildfire Gatherings**

Both Wildfire Gatherings followed the traditional protocol of the Wildfire Research Method (Kompf & Hodson, 2000) in that there was an offering of tobacco in honour of the spiritual nature of the Gathering and the Gatherings began with a traditional opening and offer of thanksgiving. At this point, the participants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves and share from their hearts and minds if they felt moved to do so. At this point, all of the participants introduced themselves and indicated their desire to contribute to this important area of research. A thorough explanation of the purpose of the research, the ethics associated with data recording, and the right to withdraw followed. Participants were told that their contributions would be recorded and later transcribed, and that their portion of the transcription would be sent to them for the member check. Once this part of the Wildfire Gathering was achieved, the audio recorders were turned on.

Wildfire Gathering 1, facilitated by John Hodson, was held in the Pond Inlet at Brock University which allowed for a comfortable and natural setting that was appropriate for the size of the group of 16 participants and 5 staff members from the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education. The gathering began with a traditional opening and then both Elders were given an opportunity to share something with the group. At this time, one of the Elders shared a teaching as it was related to the significance of the weather that morning. The morning of the first Wildfire Gathering was rainy and cold and I was concerned that many of the participants would have been unable

to attend the gathering due to the driving conditions. The teaching about the weather, however, allowed me to recognize the importance of the rain and be thankful for the weather that had been given on that morning. We were reminded of the women's responsibilities to the water and told that women have a special relationship to water and, in many Indigenous traditions, women are responsible for taking care of the water. The Elder talked about women's special relationship to the water as life-givers who carry water to sustain the next generations. We were told that the weather on the morning of the Wildfire Gathering was a reminder of the importance of the women's roles and responsibilities and that it was a spiritual verification of the importance of the Wildfire Gathering and a vision of Aboriginal women's access to university.

The Gathering continued with participant introductions and at this point I shared with the group the overall principles and goals of the access program and the importance of bringing participants from the six major elements of success together to discuss the vision for an access program for Aboriginal women. The Gathering continued as we moved through the Vision, Relationships, Knowledge, and Action discussion guide (Appendix A).

I facilitated Wildfire Gathering 2 in a small room located at the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education at Brock University. This room allowed for a comfortable and more intimate environment that was appropriate for the size of the group which included 4 participants, 1 Elder, and 3 staff members from the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education. This environment offered a welcoming and safe atmosphere that was conducive to the sharing that took place.

The Wildfire Gathering began with an offering of tobacco and a traditional

opening. I explained the agenda for the day by briefly going through the information packages which included a discussion guide, a background document that offered some background literature informing the program, the principles and goals of the program, and a fact sheet, that I created with demographics from Statistics Canada (Appendix B), offering a snapshot of Aboriginal women's realities in education. I then offered my own personal story in the form of my educational narrative, beginning from the start of my educational journey in grade school to my current experience in graduate education. I then invited the participants to share their own personal educational narratives. By sharing my own personal narrative first, I believe that I was able to shift from being a researcher to a participant in the Gathering (Creswell, 2009) allowing the participants to conceptualize my in-depth understanding of their narrative through my own personal experiences. I believe this allowed for a more comfortable sharing environment, enabling a deeper level of relating and connecting between the participants and me. As I shared my own educational narrative with the women, they shared theirs in return, offering in-depth renditions of their educational experiences. The strength in this is that the women's experiences were notably similar to mine and I could see my story reflected in theirs. The Elder also offered her own educational narrative in a way that was encouraging and supportive. In sharing her own narrative, the Elder was able to demonstrate a deep connection and understanding to the women's narratives.

The sharing of our personal stories served as an ice breaker, allowing for a comfortable, understanding, and open atmosphere and this was evident in the extent of what was shared and the emotions that were released in the circle. It also set the scene for the participants to begin thinking and reflecting about their experiences, and relating and

connecting to one another as we moved through the discussion guide to vision a university access program designed to meet the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and families (Appendix C).

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion of the Wildfire Gatherings, the data files were later transcribed using Express Scribe and member checks were conducted. Once my transcriptions and the member checks were complete, I followed the guidelines set out in Creswell (2009):

Step 1. *Organize and prepare* the data for analysis. This involves transcribing interviews, optically scanning material, typing up field notes, or sorting and arranging the data into different types on the sources of information.

Step 2. Read through all the data. A first step is to obtain a *general sense* of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning...write notes in margins or start recording general thoughts about the data at this stage.

Step 3. Begin detailed analysis with a coding process. Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information. (pp. 185-186)

Using the above steps, I began by getting my transcriptions organized and ready for analysis. As an active participant in the Wildfire Gatherings, by way of sharing my educational narrative, it was important that I separated myself from the data so that my own contributions in the gathering did not overpower that of the other participants. As I readied my data for analysis, I removed my educational narrative from the transcription. I also felt that it was important that I separated the Elder's portion of the transcription as

the Elder's role as participant in the gathering was distinct from the other participants. That being said, I also want to acknowledge that "the consultative interaction [of the Wildfire Gathering] engages a synergy that encourages participants to build on the words of another, or have their experience validated through the experience of others within the circle" (Hodson, 2004, p. 53). The contributions from the Elder along with my own played a significant role in this synergy within the Wildfire Gathering that cannot be separated from or left out of the analysis. For this reason, the data were analyzed with this in mind and the Elders' contributions are explored in the findings.

I read and reread through all of my data to get a general sense of the text and reflect on the meaning. I also wrote personal reflections as I made sense of the data. At this point, I was also able to make connections between the two Wildfire Gatherings, which offered further insight into the data. While Wildfire Gathering 1 with the 'Experts in the Fields' was conducted to bridge the gaps among many fragmented service providers, and make connections among the six major elements of success for accessible education of Aboriginal women to envision how an access program for those women might look. Wildfire Gathering 2 was conducted to see what the needs of Aboriginal women are and what they would like to see in such an access program as told from the women themselves. I then began to code my data by allowing the codes to emerge during the data analysis (Creswell, 2009) with the above objectives in mind. While the participant numbers differ from Wildfire Gathering 1, with 16 participants, and Wildfire Gathering 2, with 4 participants, the balance rests in the research design that allowed for the in-depth narratives of 4 women, whose access to and success within university is

dependent on the accessibility of numerous intersecting services, along with the contributions of individuals whose positions inform how to connect those services.

My data were then analyzed using a qualitative research software program, NVivo 8, designed to help people manage, analyze, and make sense of large amounts of text. This program allowed me to identify “parent codes” or themes and related “child codes” or subthemes. NVivo allowed me to systemically organize my data with advanced features in which I was able to identify where my segments of data came from in the transcript. In this way, the context of the segment did not get lost in the analysis. It also allowed me to connect my personal reflections to related themes from the participants.

Aboriginal women are well-versed in their colonial position within mainstream education. They have the personal knowledge, through lived experience, to define the barriers they face with access to university and to determine their needs for access to and success within university. This knowledge base made it easy for me to manage the significant amount of text as I engaged in the coding process. As much as possible I left the terms that I adopted as codes in the words of the participants. This informed my development of the themes and their related subthemes. To further describe how I came to the final themes, I will offer a couple of examples of how I coded the data.

In Wildfire Gathering 2 Janet expressed “There’s no room to change him. There’s no change tables in the school anywhere, no bathrooms where you can take a baby into.” This was originally coded as “space.” Once I had coded all of the text I was able to go through my codes to come up with themes and subthemes. It was apparent that a number of codes included elements that were integral to Aboriginal women’s university access and, therefore, “critical elements of access and success” emerged as a theme, in which



Janet's contribution was placed within as the subtheme "space and accessibility." In Wildfire Gathering 2, I allowed Sherry's words to inform the name of the code in which her contribution was placed:

so then that's when school started taking a really big turn with me like I pretend I was sick and then I'd call home all the time I'd want to go home and in high school um it was the same thing I was more I was really interested in my culture and I really had a strong worldview already by that point and the experiences that I went through in the classroom and at school I knew they weren't right and I knew I didn't agree with them um I knew what felt right to me I knew where I wanted to be I knew what I wanted to be doing and it just it didn't feel right to be there so um I hardly ever went to my classes which was really bad.

Leaving this contribution in the words of the participant, I easily came up with the theme "strong worldview." When going through my themes, it became apparent then many of these segments fit into an overarching theme of "identity." Therefore, this segment was placed into the subtheme "strong worldview" under the theme "identity." This same contribution from Sherry was also placed in the code "educational experience of racism." Through NVivo it was easy to place a segment of text into more than one code. This was very helpful as the data often crossed many contexts and identified so many important elements of educational experience and access. For this reason, there are participant contributions that have been placed in more than one theme. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the varied experiences that are described in the educational narratives.

### **Methodological Assumptions**

As I have identified myself as a participant in this research by offering and examining my own personal experience, it is unreasonable for the reader to assume that I am objective in my analysis of the data. As a result of my personal experience, I have developed an emotional connection to the experiences of other Aboriginal women in education. I believe that my passion and in-depth understanding of the research is a strength in the analysis of the data as it provides me with a deeper understanding of the many intersecting experiences of Aboriginal women in education. That being said, I do understand that my experience is both unique and personal and, for this reason, I am cautious about the influences my own experiences could have on my perceptions of the participants' narratives. It is necessary that I am extremely cautious about my position within the research, so that I do not make any unwarranted generalizations about the stories of the participants.

I began this research with the intention of exploring the educational narratives of Aboriginal women to assess the barriers associated with access to and success within university. Initially, I conceptualized these barriers to be definable accessibility variables such as the need for childcare, housing, funding, along with the need for culturally relevant educational opportunities. I could not, however, have anticipated the deep level of highly rich data and the power of emotion that came out of the Wildfire Gatherings. These data allowed me to understand how the past, present, and future are inextricably linked to identity formation and everyday lived experiences. My focus on access to and success within university is now informed by my understanding of the link between positive cultural identity formation and educational success.

### **Limitations**

This study has been limited to a very specific group of women who may share similarities related to demography and localized experiences. It is important to note that the stories shared are unique to the participants in this study and are not necessarily reflective of the educational experiences of all Aboriginal women in Canada. While we all have our own unique stories, we do share a common history of colonialism, assimilation, and oppression. This history shapes the relationship that Aboriginal women have to the Canadian education system in complex ways. The women in this study all share these commonalities with respect to education.

My connection to the participants through ancestry, geographical location, and community affiliation is likely to provide me with a different lens on the narratives than someone from outside these connections. My insider lens provides me with a deeper understanding that is beneficial to this study as I am able to connect with the participants on a more intimate level. I suspect that the women may have felt more comfortable and more willing and eager to share with me because of this connection or they may have felt reluctant and shared less because of this relationship.

Both of the Wildfire Gatherings involved community members from the local urban Aboriginal community as well as the Six Nations community. Their involvement as active participants is considered imperative to this project. It is critical that any program development stemming from this project continue to be informed through consistent guidance, direction, and recommendations from the Aboriginal community.

Throughout this research, I have sought out community input through the Aboriginal Education Council (AEC) and through the Wildfire Gatherings. One of the

pressing concerns has been that this project fails to acknowledge Aboriginal men. I became concerned about this issue and have taken the time to reflect and give it serious consideration. I decided that it is reasonable that the focus remain on the barriers facing Aboriginal women because the unique and specific needs of women have not been met by existing Aboriginal programming in the institution such as childcare. That being said, I also acknowledge the experiences of Aboriginal men in education and that there are men who are raising families singlehandedly who could also benefit from such an access program. For this reason, I recommend that future research look into the experiences of Aboriginal men in education who are raising families.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to commencing this research, I obtained ethics clearance through Brock University Research Ethics Board (Appendix D). All participants were provided with information packages that included a letter of invitation and a confidentiality agreement. The conditions of this agreement and the research process were thoroughly explained to all the participants throughout the project. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been used and any identifiers have been removed from the data. In addition, the data have been kept secure in a locked drawer at the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education. All transcriptions have gone through a member checking process, which has allowed the participants to verify their contribution and make any clarifications or deletions as needed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: MY EDUCATIONAL NARRATIVE**

I will begin this section by explaining why I have chosen to share this narrative. Sharing this piece was a difficult choice as in doing so I allow myself to become vulnerable. This is a risk I take and I hope that the reasons why I have decided to do so become evident. I have an extended family member who often tells me that it is amazing that I have done so well for myself given the experiences I have been through. I have come to realize, however, that while I have the ability to be timely and responsible when it comes to employment and education and I may be described as “having a good head on my shoulders,” I am also often described as painfully shy. As a way to protect myself from pain, I am cautious about allowing people to get close. I do not speak up and often remain silent. I have come to understand this behavior through a reflection of my past experiences. I am in a current and ongoing process of finding my own voice and I share this story as a means of self-expression. I know that my story is not uncommon among other Aboriginal women and I share my story as a representation of some of the hardships faced as revealed through my own personal experience. It is my intention in sharing my story that I will offer inspiration to other women with similar stories as I have found inspiration in listening to the lived experiences of others. I find strength in having my own experiences reflected in others and this has assisted me to find my own voice by way of self-expression. I also find both strength and healing in understanding my lived experiences in the context of my colonial reality.

Sharing my story contributes to the slim literature that exists on Aboriginal experiences in education. I offer this story through an examination of my historical reality, an understanding of my present reality, and an expression of my future

aspirations. By connecting the past, present, and future, I demonstrate the interconnectedness of these variables as they shape our experiences within education.

**Rakhtsi:a**

Is it you that is here  
 In my Moments weak  
 I am yearning to feel  
 Something is incomplete  
 You came in my dreams  
 What was it you speak  
 The memories have faded  
 Yet in distance I reach  
 In whispers of the wind  
 There is something you teach...

I wrote the above piece in memory of my brother who moved onto the Spirit World at a very young age. With the passing of my older brother, I became a lone Native child in a non-Native home. My older brother, however, has always been a source of strength for me as I continue to feel his spirit walking beside me. I am grateful to my Mother who allowed me to develop an understanding of my cultural identity by ensuring my involvement with the local Native Friendship Centre. As a young girl I was very involved with the programming that was offered through the Centre. In fact, the majority of my childhood memories that I can recall involved the Centre. From a very early age I attended their Little Beavers program, an after-school program where we participated in both cultural and recreational activities, and every summer I attended their day camp. The

day camp involved the usual outdoor activities such as going to the park, going to the beach, and playing outdoor games. There was also a strong cultural element where we took time to learn traditional teachings, listened to storytelling, and learned how to do beadwork. Every summer we went camping for a week up north where we learned what it was like to live off the land. We were up early for sunrise ceremony, we ate traditional foods, and we participated in social dances in the evening. These programs had a very strong impact on my life. Through these programs, I learned about my identity as a young Mohawk girl. I also learned to laugh and to play. My experiences in the Native Centre programs were very different than my experiences in school.

### **Elementary School**

My experiences in school did not have the same kind of impact on shaping my identity. In fact, the incidents that stand out for me the most from elementary school are not positive experiences. For example, my memories of Grade 2 are of continually being sent out into the hallway. I remember one day early in the school year my Grade 2 teacher had asked me who my parents were because she knew my last name. When I told her the names of my parents she let me know that she used to teach my Father. At this time, what I knew of my Father was that he had never finished Grade 8. Eventually, he became an iron worker and was working in South Dakota. I did not have a close relationship with him but he would send letters once in a while. I cherished those letters. I knew my Father was a very heavy drinker and as a result was often in and out of jail. I also knew that I was scared to be around my Father when he was drinking. My relationship with my Father was complex. As a young girl, I had only seen him on a couple of occasions and talked to him on the phone a number of times and he had usually

been drinking. He would ask me how much I loved him and I would tell him I loved him up to the sky. I knew he was my Father but I did not call him Dad. To me, he was Billy. In Grade 2, when my teacher let me know that she had taught my Father, this was all I knew of my Father. From that point on I naturally associated her treatment towards me as a reflection of her views of my Father.

*Where the Spirit Lives* (Haldane, Jordan, Shepherd, Stephens, Leckie & Pittman, 1989) is a documentary about residential schools. I was in Grade 4 when I watched this movie during the Little Beavers program at the Native Friendship Centre. The documentary tells the story of a young girl who is taken from her home and placed in a residential school. When the girl arrives at the school she is brought into a room where her long hair is cut short and she is forced to take on the name, Amelia. When this young girl becomes close friends with another girl in the school she tells her that her name is Estockamie. In Grade 4, I used this name, Estockamie, as the name of the main character in all of the short stories I wrote. I remember my Grade 4 teacher as my favorite elementary school teacher. She was very supportive and encouraging of all of her students. She emphasized the importance of creative writing and we had a writing folder where all our short stories were kept. I was chosen to attend a writer's workshop based on one of my short stories about my imagined character, Estockamie. This was a positive aspect of my elementary school years because I was able to excel in my writing and incorporate pieces of myself and what was meaningful to me into my school work. I explore this further later in the chapter.

There were also experiences that I had in Grade 4 that were not so positive. We had a supply teacher who spent a lot of time with us that year. She was not as supportive



of all students in the class. In fact, I can remember thinking that this teacher was racist. When I look back at this now, I find it very troubling that in Grade 4 I could actually think of a teacher as being racist. I remember going home and talking to my Mom about how this teacher was treating us. I can also remember in both Grade 4 and Grade 8 being given a detention for laughing in class. These were times when the entire class had been laughing about something but I always seemed to be the last one to stop laughing. I had a difficult time trying to control my laughter after the class had stopped and I was punished for this. Once again I would head down to the detention room and sit there wondering why I was always seen as a bad student.

In her book, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*, Anderson (2000b) identifies the importance of laughter among Aboriginal women:

One of Corbiere's tools of resistance and recovery is humor. She learned this lesson from her Mother too, who said, "That's what brings you out of depression, is laughter, nothing else. No pills will do it....The more you laugh, the longer your life will be. If you cry all the time, you shorten up your life, thereby depriving your children of yourself." Similarly, Lila Tabobondung worked with Ojibway Grandmother Vera Martin when she was beginning to reclaim a positive identity as a Native person. Tabobondung remembers that residential school killed the laughter in her, as she used to get strapped for laughing. She credits Martin for bringing her back to laughter, and observes that there is always laughter in Indian groups and organizations. "Native women are always laughing." (p. 152)

This passage prompted me to reflect on my elementary school experiences where I was given a detention for laughing in class. I now understand the importance of laughter

among Aboriginal women and I understand the need for cross-cultural understandings in the classroom with respect to laughter.

Despite going through elementary school being well aware of racism and feeling that some of my teachers held racist attitudes towards me, I was still very proud to be a Mohawk girl. I graduated from Grade 8 in a traditional buckskin dress. This was how I had always wanted to graduate and I planned to attend all of my graduations in my traditional regalia. At the time, this was something that was very important to me.

### **Secondary School**

The sense of cultural pride that I had during elementary school shifted during my high school years when I began to develop a sense of my own cultural shame. This strengthened throughout high school where my experience was very different from my elementary school experience in that I was not as involved with the programs at the Native Friendship Centre and I began to move away from my culture. I stopped participating in Powwows, I lost the small bits of language I had learned, and as a result of moving to a new city, I was no longer connected to an Aboriginal community.

High school was not a very positive experience for me. I had very few close friends and we all came from single-parent low-income families. As far as I knew, I was the only Aboriginal student in the school. Throughout high school I constantly felt that I was viewed as a poor student. There were not many teachers with whom I developed a relationship with. In fact, there was only one teacher who I can think of as a supportive teacher. I was in the first class she ever taught, which was a Grade 11 creative writing class. I received a grade of 80% in this class and that was the highest mark I had ever been given in high school. This class and the law class that I took, both elective courses,

were the only classes I enjoyed in high school. None of the other classes were relevant to me, and, as a result, I felt very disconnected and unmotivated. History and English were the most difficult courses for me. I simply had no desire to learn about the things that were taught in these classes as they were not relevant to my life or my worldview and I could not see my own experiences as an Aboriginal student represented in the courses. Despite my negative experiences in high school, I had developed a strong sense of social justice and a determination to continue my education well beyond secondary school. My dream was to go to the University of Ottawa to study Criminology and to eventually apply to Law School. I knew that to do this I would have to go to college first since I did not have advanced standing in high school.

My Grade 11 year was a really difficult year for me emotionally. My Mom had been involved in a relationship with someone who I really did not like. It was an unhealthy relationship and she was all over the place both physically and emotionally. My Mother was never home. There were a number of times when she would stay out all night. I took care of myself in a way many 15-year-olds probably would in this situation. I leaned on my two closest friends, but I do not remember ever talking about what I was going through with them. We talked about other stuff that 15-year-old girls talk about. Everything else that was going on in my home life was my life and that is just the way it was. I skipped school a lot that year and since my Mom was not home a lot during this time, I was able to erase the phone message from the school secretary indicating that I was not in class. However, I was not really sure that my attendance in school was a concern of my Mother's at this point in her life. One day towards the end of my Grade 11 year my Mom came home after being away all weekend and let me know that she had

something to tell me. My intuition was strong and I had a good idea of what my Mother was going to tell me but I listened anyway. My Mom had told me that she had gotten married over the weekend in a private ceremony and she wanted to let me know. I remember telling my Mom that I did not care and walking away. I am not really sure how I felt about this at the time because I avoided it. What I do know is that I was a young girl who lived with a Mother who was more of a stranger to me. My Mom and I did not communicate with each other and I had very little respect for her. This was my life and I did not know it any other way. Shortly after she told me about her new marriage, she let me know that we would be moving into a new house with her new husband. It was very clear to me from the beginning that I was not wanted there. I lived there for about a month before I came home from my summer job one day and found my stuff packed by the door. I was angry but this did not come as a surprise. My life was changing very fast and I was scared. I was only 16 years old, but I knew that this was my time to leave home.

I applied to stay at the YWCA, a home for young women and had an interview with them on the spot and they explained to me how things worked there such as house duties and curfews. Feeling as though this was my only option I proceeded with my application and was ready to make this my new home, but at the last minute a distant family member, who I refer to as an Aunt now, called to tell me that she had an extra room for me at her house. I was picked up that evening. As this was a very difficult period in my life, when I was going through a lot of life changes very quickly, I cannot remember much of what happened for the rest of that summer. I was not very close with my Aunt; I had babysat for her a few times before and seen her at a few family gatherings

but up until this point that had been the extent of our relationship. I leaned on my friends to get me through this difficult time, but again I do not remember it being something we talked about.

The new school year started quickly and it was my final year of high school, Grade 12. My Aunt let me know right away that there were rules to be followed and that there would be absolutely no excuses for missing classes. She was hard on me and very strict, giving me a kind of guidance that I was not used to. I am very grateful that she was there for me during this hard time in my life. I look back at this as being a crucial time when I needed this type of guidance the most, even if it was coming from someone with whom I did not have a close relationship. I think that my Aunt's persistence during this time had a significant influence on the fact that I did finish high school. My Aunt let me know that I would have to pay rent to stay there and as a student I was eligible for student assistance. This was difficult for me, as the school became familiar with my situation and the social assistance worker met with me at school on a monthly basis. I only lived with my Aunt for the year. While she was supportive of me in important ways, there were also times when I felt very alone and could not turn to her. As a young woman trying to get through high school, I did not have the emotional support I needed.

By the end of the year, I knew once again that it was my time to move on. That summer after Grade 12, I got my first apartment with one of my best friends who had been going through a similar situation. At this time we were both 17 years old and living in our own apartment. I worked that summer at a local tourist gift shop and continued working there in the fall. I was scheduled to work every Friday and Saturday night that year. I am sure that this kept me out of trouble. I did engage in some forms of risky

behaviour and when I look back at this now I am saddened to think that a 17 year old girl should ever be in some of the situations that I was in. Living on my own forced me to grow up very fast. I felt very independent but at the same time I was too young to make some of the decisions I had made. I was young, trusting, and very naive. Lucky for me I had a drive to make a better life for myself and I made a lot of positive decisions during this year. One of these decisions, to finish high school, was driven by my desire to get a college degree and then apply to university.

I still had one final high school credit to get before I could apply to college. I tried to take a self-study home schooling course to get this final credit. This was definitely not for me. I ended up returning the books. I continued working throughout the year and talked to my co-workers about my desire to apply to college and needing to get one final high school credit. One of my coworkers told me about an Adult Learning Centre where students can complete a high school credit in 1 month. I did this in February of that year. February was the slowest month of the year for business and I was able to work less hours (weekends only) so I could attend this school and get my final credit. Fortunately for me, my employers were in full support of this. This was important because I was on my own and I had to work to support myself. This meant that my options for finishing high school were limited. The store I was working at was run by a Korean family. The store was managed by two brothers, a sister, and their parents who were “Grandma” and “Grandpa” to all of us who worked in the store. They all had children of their own, some of whom were in high school. “Grandma” and “Grandpa” came to the store everyday to visit. During this time in my life, this family began to feel like the closest thing to family

I had myself. Their support for me to take time off to finish high school was very important.

My experience at the Adult Learning Centre was a difficult one. Attending an Adult Learning Centre at the age of 17 was an awkward experience for me because I was a lot younger than everyone else in my class. However, I was determined to finish high school and I knew that it was only 1 month long. As I was determined to get into college the following year, I began filling out college applications. I applied to the Law and Security and Police Foundation programs at a few different colleges in hopes of this being my way into the University of Ottawa in the near future. I finished my course at the Adult Learning Centre meaning that I had successfully completed high school. I never attended a high school graduation and this was not important to me given that my high school experience was a difficult one. My vision of attending another graduation in my traditional regalia was not realized and at the time this was the furthest thing from my mind. I was just glad to be done high school and able to move on to the next step.

### **College**

I was accepted into the Law and Security program at a local community college and was ready to start in the fall of 2000. I was really nervous about my first day of college. It was very exciting to begin this new chapter in my life but I had no idea what to expect. Going to college was a huge step for me. My first day went really well and as I continued to attend I began to really enjoy the overall college experience. There were other Native students in my class! This was great. I no longer felt like I was the only Native girl in school like I did in high school. The three of us became friends and we spent a lot of time in between classes hanging out and studying in the First Nations

Student Services Office. We all did well in the program and I know that our friendship and space in the First Nations Student Services Office contributed to our successes.

While my college experience was a positive one, there were still barriers that I faced. One of these barriers was an experience I had with a course instructor. He was the instructor for the first year Criminology class that was a mandatory course in the Law and Security Program. During one class he began to talk about prisoner profiles. Not only was he descriptive about what he presented as the typical prisoner, but he also passed around photos of real prisoners so we would really understand what a prisoner looks like. The photos that he began to pass around were all of Aboriginal men. As he continued to pass these photos around and identify one prisoner who was notorious for attempting to escape prison on numerous occasions, I began to feel angry. It was not even a sense of shame that I was feeling during this time; it was anger at this instructor's clear and direct message about Aboriginal men. I was shocked that the instructor was so direct and so clear with his message and when I could not take it anymore I gathered up my books and I walked out of the class. I was surprised to see that a few of my classmates followed me out of the room. These were non-Aboriginal friends who were sympathetic and supportive of my decision to walk out of the class. We discussed this through a group debriefing session outside the classroom. Despite this barrier, I continued to attend this class having different feelings about the course instructor who once inspired me.

### **Housing**

During my time in college I lived with two other students in the basement floor of a home. We shared a kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom. The other two students who I lived with came from out of town. I came from the same city where we roomed



together. The family who rented the student rooms was very skeptical of this. They could not understand why I would need housing since I was not from out of town. When most students rent rooms like this, their parents go along with them to meet and interview with the family who is renting out their home. This was not the case with me. I was a local student who needed a place to live and my situation was different than that of the typical college student. I was judged by the family right away and they needed me to justify why I needed to rent a room from them. For me, this was a barrier. It was also a very uncomfortable moment; a moment when I was put in a position where I needed to prove to the family that I would be just as good a tenant as the other two students. Presumably, it is a barrier for other Aboriginal students as well since access to housing is a pressing issue. I have come across other Aboriginal women in similar situations who leave home early and need housing. As a college or university student, local Aboriginal women who leave home early should be able to access housing in the same way as other students who are leaving their family home for the first time. Student rooms are more affordable than renting an apartment and more feasible for students, local or not.

Another housing barrier for me was that the family expected me to leave for 2 weeks during the Christmas vacation as most students would. My roommates had a home to return to for this holiday. I did not. The fact that I did not have a family to return to for the holiday was hard enough. Needing to leave the only housing arrangement I had for this holiday and find somewhere to stay made this even more difficult. This was an emotionally hard time for me and I just wanted the holiday to be over so I could get back into school and keep busy. As long as I was preoccupied I was able to avoid dealing with some of the issues I was going through at the time such as my lack of family support.

In spite of these barriers that I faced, I successfully completed the program and I continue to look back on my college experience as an enjoyable experience. It was a much better and more meaningful experience than high school had been. I attended my college graduation and was very happy to attend. In fact, the director of the First Nations Student Services Office at Niagara College made sure that the other two Native students and I had our pictures taken after the ceremony and a group shot of us was used for the First Nations Student Services pamphlet.

### **University**

My applications to university had been sent out during my second year of college and I was accepted into the University of Ottawa to study Criminology. I was very happy about this but at the same time I was also really scared. While I felt very alone at times and did not have the family support that most students have, the familiarity of the smaller city offered some comfort that a large city, like Ottawa, where I had no connections did not. I also had a boyfriend at this time, and the lack of other supports made my dependency on this relationship stronger. This was a large factor in my hesitation to move to Ottawa, even though attending the University of Ottawa had been something I had dreamed of for a long time. As a last minute decision, I applied to a program at a nearby university that allowed me to do a minor in Criminology. It was not the program that I wanted but it felt safer. That summer I became pregnant with my son, Jayden. This made my decision to not attend the University of Ottawa an easy one. My son's Father and I moved in together and I started at the local university in September 2002. My first year of university was a difficult one. I was young, pregnant with my first child, and in a relationship where I was not getting the support I needed. I managed to get through this

year on the living allowance from my band funding. My son was born only 2 weeks before I went to write my final exams. Then I was able to stay home with him until I returned to school in September. When I started my second year, my son was 5 months old. I was able to get a daycare spot for him that was subsidized through the local Children's Services and he attended the childcare centre while I attended classes. I would not have been able to continue university had it not been for both receiving a subsidy for my childcare and a childcare spot.

During my second year of university, my relationship with my son's Father ended and I became a single Mother. This was difficult for me financially and, for this reason, I made a decision to supplement my monthly living allowance with an OSAP loan. I also made a decision to attend school throughout the summer. While my band office encouraged most students to find a summer job, I did not think that this was in my best interest as a single Mother who needed to rely on childcare. It made more sense for me to continue taking classes throughout the spring and summer terms than to find a summer job and ensure that it was one that fit within the time frames of my childcare hours. Since my band office that funded my education was in favour of students finding summer employment, my funding was cut for the spring summer term and I had to rely on a full OSAP loan during this time so that I could support myself and my son financially. This allowed me to take on a lighter course load during the school year. It also allowed me to finish my Honours degree in 4 years like most full-time students while attending classes for 12 months as opposed to 8. While these decisions that I had to make are not typical of the average university student, they are typical of Aboriginal single Mothers who are students. There is a lot of negotiating, applications, and paperwork to be done to support

these decisions and this serves as a barrier to education access for Aboriginal women. However, I was determined to overcome any barriers I faced and finish my degree in hopes that I could provide for my son and hopefully secure a decent employment opportunity when I was done. That being said, my goal of attending Law School one day changed and I was not exactly sure where my undergraduate degree would lead.

My experience at university was much different than my experience at college. I did not make very many friends here. This was difficult for me because I was still quite young, the same age as my classmates, and yet my life was completely different. I was not able to engage myself in university life as most students were and at times this was very isolating. I was a single Mom with a ton of responsibility and most of my classmates were students who were young and free. Many took vacations during reading week, went to the student socials, and attended other outings. As a young Mother I was not able to participate in these activities. The reality was that I had little in common with any of my classmates and this made it very difficult for me to develop relationships with other students. I attended my classes and went straight to daycare to pick up Jayden and we went home. The large class sizes were very intimidating and this also made it difficult to make friends. I did get to know other classmates a bit better when we would be paired up for seminar presentations. However, this was also a barrier for me as a Mother because childcare needs made it difficult for me to meet with students in the evenings to work with a partner on a seminar presentation. There were a number of times when I would bring my son with me to the library and meet with the other students to work on our presentations. This also led into conversations about how I managed to “do it” with a child. One student even commented that he can hardly take care of himself as a university

student and wondered how I was able to do it with a child. Sometimes answering these questions was difficult because I felt like I always had to explain myself and my situation as a single Mother. For me, I did not really think about how I did it. I just did. This was simply my reality as an undergraduate student.

### **Childcare**

As a Mother, childcare is necessary for my being able to attend classes and have study time to do my work. Accessing childcare, however, is not an easy task. Childcare is very expensive and the wait lists are long. As a single Mother, I have been able to access a subsidy from the local children's services department to cover my childcare costs. However, the process of accessing subsidized childcare is very intrusive and I presume that this is very uncomfortable for young Aboriginal women. Like other social services, eligibility for subsidy requires revealing a lot of personal information, such as income levels, living arrangements, and so on, which places applicants in vulnerable and uncomfortable positions. Further, there is a power relation between the Children Services Caseworker and the client. This power relation is evident in the title "Children Services Caseworker." It is a relationship in which the caseworker may come with his or her own biases and direct these towards clients. My own experience with my caseworker has been one in which I have felt very uncomfortable as a result of the power relations that exist in our relationship. I have had to continually justify my need for childcare as my course schedule changed. I have also had to go through an experience in which my caseworker stated that if I have my child in care when I am not in class, then I am wasting tax payer's money. Her statement reinforced the power relationship between us as caseworker and client where I am put under scrutiny and my daily activities become monitored. It also

upset me as I was in a position where I relied on childcare in order to successfully complete my undergraduate degree which included a need for study time and student professional development. In spite of such comments, I have had to make sure that my schedule will justify my need for a full-time daycare spot. This has been difficult when my classes have been evening classes. There was a time when I had to change my class schedule in order to keep my son's daycare spot. This was because the region would only subsidize 3 days of care based on my course schedule but the daycare required 5 paid days per week in order to secure a childcare spot. That meant I would have to pay for the days the subsidy did not cover or else I would lose my son's daycare spot. Since I could not afford to pay for the other 2 days, I had to shift my schedule around and pick courses that would justify the Niagara Region paying for the full daycare fee. In addition to the class schedule, the region also requests a letter from a professor indicating the need for care. This means I have to ask a professor to draft a letter for my subsidy worker, revealing my personal situation to my professor, which, in turn, puts me in an uncomfortable position. Childcare subsidy eligibility is assessed annually and all documentation including class schedules and letters of verification are requested per term.

Another barrier I have faced since I have had my children in care is about trust and communication. Having your children spend the majority of their day with a childcare worker makes a relationship of trust and strong communication between the childcare worker and the parent essential. I myself have experienced a situation at my son's daycare centre that put me in a very uncomfortable position after being interrogated about a bruise on my son that was actually a skin discolouration. This particular situation

that arose represents a unique barrier for Aboriginal women as the high incidents of Family and Children's Services intervening in Aboriginal families places a significant fear of having our children taken away. When I left the daycare centre after this particular incident, the threat of having Family and Children's Services involved crossed my mind and I was both fearful and very upset. I believe that this would also cross the minds of other Aboriginal women and may even lead to them not bringing their child back to daycare. This highlights the importance of childcare providers who are sensitive to the realities of Aboriginal families and who can engage in trusting relationships with the parents based on open communication. I also believe that the above situation speaks to the importance of culturally appropriate childcare providers for Aboriginal families such as Head Start programs. The closest Head Start programs to this area are at least a 30 minute drive away, which means I have not been able to access this program.

Another barrier for me was that my position as a single Mother made it difficult for me to meet certain expectations as a university student. Young children in daycare get sick more often than those who are not in daycare and this means that there were times when I missed classes because I was unable to bring my son to daycare. I had to ask for extensions on most of my final assignments because I had difficulty meeting these deadlines even when my son was not sick. This is because I could not put as much time into final assignments as other students. When I picked my son up from daycare, I cared for him, and was not able to turn to my assignments until after he was in bed. By that time I was often too exhausted to effectively work on my assignments. For this reason, I often asked for extensions in advance. While a lot of teachers were understanding about this, some were not and this was reflected in my final grades.

### **Administrative Supports**

Throughout my undergraduate degree, I faced a number of administrative barriers that made my experience more difficult than necessary. I found my particular program very hard to navigate and I found that the academic advising offered through the department was not very informative. I had met with academic advising twice as an undergraduate student and both times I felt very rushed. I also found the department to be very uninviting for Aboriginal students. I believe that this is difficult for a lot of Aboriginal students who already experience the university as an intimidating place. I was not comfortable approaching the staff and developing the relationships that I needed in order to navigate my way through the program. I found that a lot of the professors came and left and this made it even more difficult for me to establish relationships with them. In fact, at the time, I did not know or think that these relationships were important. There were a few professors that I did feel comfortable with but these professors are no longer at the university. This was a problem for me when I began to think about my application to graduate studies. I think if I had developed relationships with a few of the professors who were still at the university, I would not have faced some of the problems that I did with being discouraged to apply to graduate studies. I believe that ensuring all university departments, and not just Aboriginal student services, are inviting and Aboriginal friendly is important and will have a significant impact on the needs of future Aboriginal students.

### **Invisibility and Silencing**

For the most part, my undergraduate experience was characterized by my own invisibility and silencing. In my classes, I always found that when the professors spoke



they assumed that they were speaking to a homogenous group; a group that is privileged and shares a common worldview. I found that in doing this, almost all of the professors I have had addressed the class by saying “you,” “we,” or “us.” Not only do these classroom experiences leave me with a very unsettling feeling, but they also reinforce my colonial position within the university. I am not included in those “you,” “we,” or “us” statements nor do I share in the same experiences, values, or worldviews. In fact, most of the time, I fit into the experience of the “other” group that the teacher is discussing. These moments reinforce my own separation from the class as my experiences are marginalized, excluded, and invalidated. It is also evident that my professors were not even aware of this form of exclusion or marginalization and, in this way, my experiences, as an Aboriginal woman in the classroom, have been invisible.

Along with these moments or feelings of exclusion come other feelings that arise when Aboriginal women are the topic of the class discussion. All of a sudden there is this shift where I go from being invisible to becoming the topic of conversation. To sit in a classroom and listen to the professors discuss Aboriginal women, like myself, through a process of othering is a very unsettling experience. I can remember one time when the “Mohawk Warrior” became the topic of discussion. While this was for a popular culture class and I agree with what the teacher had to say, as she critiqued the mainstream media rendition of the “Mohawk Warrior, it was still an uncomfortable and unsettling moment; a moment in which I was not going to raise my hand and identify myself as a Mohawk woman. Reflecting on these moments, I wonder, how do I, as an Aboriginal student, get to this point where I feel this strong sense of cultural shame and become so

uncomfortable sitting in a classroom when Aboriginal peoples become the topic of the class?

The uneasy feelings and the emotions that take over in these situations come from my entire educational experience of failing to see any positive representations of what it means to be Aboriginal and from listening to the way many non-Aboriginal students talk about Aboriginal students and Aboriginal issues. For example, I cannot count the number of times the issue of Aboriginal students having their education funded is brought up in seminars. This is interesting considering the lack of Aboriginal issues that are presented in the curriculum. In these situations, I often sit back and listen to what the other students have to say. Many of my classmates have not identified me as being Mohawk. In some ways, I have looked at this as being an advantage because my classmates will not edit their comments if I sit there and keep quiet. They will freely speak their opinions in ways that I do not think they would if they knew there was a Native student in the seminar room. When I feel it is time and when I have the strength to do so, I speak up and identify who I am and try to educate the class on the issues they have raised. However, there have been times when I have been strong enough to speak up but have been silenced in the process. For example, there was one seminar in my fourth year when a fellow classmate made an all too familiar comment about how Aboriginal students get all kinds of money to go to school and they use it to drink and party and then drop out of school. My classmate continued to inform the class about someone she knew of who had received a large amount of money for tuition and had instead used the money to purchase snowmobiles. Frustrated by my classmates debasing comments, I decided to speak up and inform the seminar about how Aboriginal student funding really works as I am well

aware that band funding for tuition is paid directly to the institution. However, I did not get to finish educating the class on this issue because the seminar leader intervened and told us that it was best to move on as a way to diffuse the situation. I left the seminar feeling very upset. During the next lecture, my seminar leader apologized to me and explained to me why she had done this. She let me know that she felt that the student had been out of line but she had diffused the situation because she did not want it to escalate as she could sense the tension building in the classroom. However, I still wondered why the other student was able to get her point across, and potentially reinforce a hurtful stereotype, and I had been silenced and unable to offer my own insight. When these types of situations occur, it is very helpful to have an Aboriginal student support group to discuss these very negative classroom experiences and reflect on viable ways to address them. It was during these moments that I was able to go to Aboriginal Student Services and talk about what had happened.

### **Aboriginal Student Services**

It was not until my third year on campus that I became involved with the Aboriginal Student Services Office. I started attending the student luncheons and other events that were offered throughout the year and was able to meet other students who understood my reality and shared in my experiences. For once I did not have to explain myself and how I was able to “do it” as a single Mom. There I found an understanding and an acceptance that I never found anywhere else on campus and this was comforting. Some of the other students I met there were also Mothers balancing and shuffling their way through the university. I was finally able to feel like I had a space on campus. This represents a pinnacle point for me in my educational journey.

My son was also welcomed to come out to the events. In fact, I was always encouraged to bring him out to the events and there were other children there as well. This allowed my son to become a part of my educational experience at the university. More importantly, it allowed my son to become a member of the Aboriginal community at the university. This is so important because it allows my son to see the university as a place where the Aboriginal community is welcomed and culture is shared and embraced. He sees the university as an enjoyable place where he has met many other children. The university has become a large part of my son's life. I believe that this will have a significant impact on the way he will view the university when he gets older. Being able to bring my son, and now both of my children, to these community events has been one of the most positive experiences I have had as a university student. The existence of an Aboriginal community at the university is very important for other young Aboriginal women as it allows for a supportive system on campus where feelings of isolation and cultural shame are minimized and our unique experiences as Aboriginal women are accepted and understood.

During my last year as an undergraduate student, I along with four other women formed an Aboriginal women's hand drum group. Being a member of this group was a very healing experience for me. Not only did we support one another through our own educational experiences but we also become great friends. It was also a very empowering experience for my own developing cultural identity and it helped me to begin the process of finding my voice. Our group has been asked to sing at many of the events put on by Aboriginal Student Services as well as other community events.

One event that we sang at annually was the Aboriginal Women's day event at the university. At the fourth annual Aboriginal women's day event, the Turtle Gals performed and I was able to meet Michelle St. John who played the character Estockamie in the movie, *Where the Spirit Lives*, (Haldane, Jordan, Shepherd, Stephens, Leckie & Pittman, 1989) that I discussed earlier. I spoke with her after the performance and let her know how much meaning her role in the movie had for me and how the name Estockamie had always stuck with me as a young girl. I found this very interesting because I had watched the movie again about a month earlier so I could use a clip from the movie for a seminar presentation. I realized that the name Estockamie is only said a couple of times in the movie because the girl is called by her residential school assigned name, Amelia. As I discussed this with Michelle St. John, I realized that the name Estockamie had stuck with me the most because when the young girl resists being called by the assigned name, Amelia, and insists that her name is Estockamie, she is fighting to hold on to her identity. She told me that the name Estockamie (Ashtecome) is a Blackfoot name and that it means woman of power. Meeting her and being able to share with her how important her role in this movie was for me as a young girl was a very meaningful experience. This experience reinforces the importance of holding onto our identity as Aboriginal women.

As a university student who was able to really get back into my culture that I had moved away from during my high school years, I have found myself in situations where I have felt like I had different identities. I was one person with my non-Aboriginal peers and another person with my Aboriginal peers. Many people who are very close to me are not even aware or have only recently become aware of the fact that I am a Powwow dancer and that I sing in an Aboriginal women's group. I know that this is a result of

shame. This shame has developed over the years as I was silenced for laughing in elementary school and exposed to hearing the way non-Aboriginal students talk about Aboriginal issues. At a time when I was most connected to my culture through my involvement with the local Native Friendship Centre programs as a young girl, I was not ashamed of who I was. I was exposed to positive representations of what it meant to be Aboriginal. I incorporated myself into my writing by drawing on the role of Estockamie and I was not afraid to share my culture. However, as I moved away from these cultural connections in high school, my cultural shame grew and I became silenced. Being able to reconnect with my culture through nonacademic experiences at the university has helped me to regain this voice and begin to identify a stronger sense of self as a Mohawk woman.

### **Graduate Studies**

As a graduate student, I continue to reconnect with my culture through nonacademic experiences but I am also infusing these connections into my academic experiences. I have read the works of other Aboriginal women and had the opportunity to thread these works into my own which has been very meaningful for me. This has helped me to make sense of my own experiences by seeing them reflected within the narratives of these prominent and inspiring women. Reading these narratives has helped me to understand the devastating impact that historical and recent colonial attacks have had on Aboriginal families, and this has helped me to understand the impact these have had on my own family and the relationship I have with my Father. This is both very empowering and healing because it is helping me to become much more grounded in my identity as an Aboriginal woman through an understanding of the past. This has helped me to reflect on

my own experiences and come to understand the ways I have been shamed and silenced. In the present, I am now infusing my culture into my academic experiences much like I did as a young girl, making my academic experiences as a graduate student very rich and meaningful. The empowerment that comes with this has led me to prioritize my future efforts to continue to embrace my culture and use it to encourage other Aboriginal students, especially those who are single Mothers, to honour their traditions within the educational setting and beyond.

A fundamental part of my educational journey in graduate studies has been my discovery of Indigenous research methodology. Part of this exploration was gaining understanding of the movement towards and the importance of Indigenous research methodology. The importance of Indigenous research methodology is eminently the need for insider research and an acknowledgement and stance against outside research that is potentially harmful to Aboriginal peoples and communities. It also offers a venue for Aboriginal researchers to not only have control over their own research but to be able to carry it out in a way that is culturally appropriate and relevant and for the betterment of the community.

As an Aboriginal woman enrolled in graduate studies, I felt empowered to be able to use an Aboriginal research method, The Wildfire Gathering, to conduct my own research. I felt empowered because my own understanding as an Aboriginal woman was central to the way I carried out my research. This allows me to use an option that I am comfortable and familiar with and I am confident that my research participants were comfortable with this design as well. Moreover, I feel that by doing my research through an Indigenous framework that is new to mainstream education, I have contributed to the

creation of new knowledge through both my research and the way I carried out my research. At a time when these methods are just starting to become recognized and accepted in the mainstream, I hope that as I continue on my educational journey, my research will help to strengthen and contribute to the recognition of the need for Indigenous research methods.

By sharing this deeply personal story I believe I have contributed to the research by demonstrating how I have negotiated my cultural identity throughout the entirety of my educational experience. My story reveals that when I was most connected to my culture I had a much stronger sense of self, and I benefited from a more enjoyable and successful experience. It also reveals the many interconnected barriers that Aboriginal women face throughout their educational journeys. The findings from the participants, whose stories will follow in the next chapter, mirror my story in deep and meaningful ways by revealing not only a vision of access to and success within universities, but also opportunities for universities to embrace and promote strong cultural identities among Aboriginal women and their children.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS**

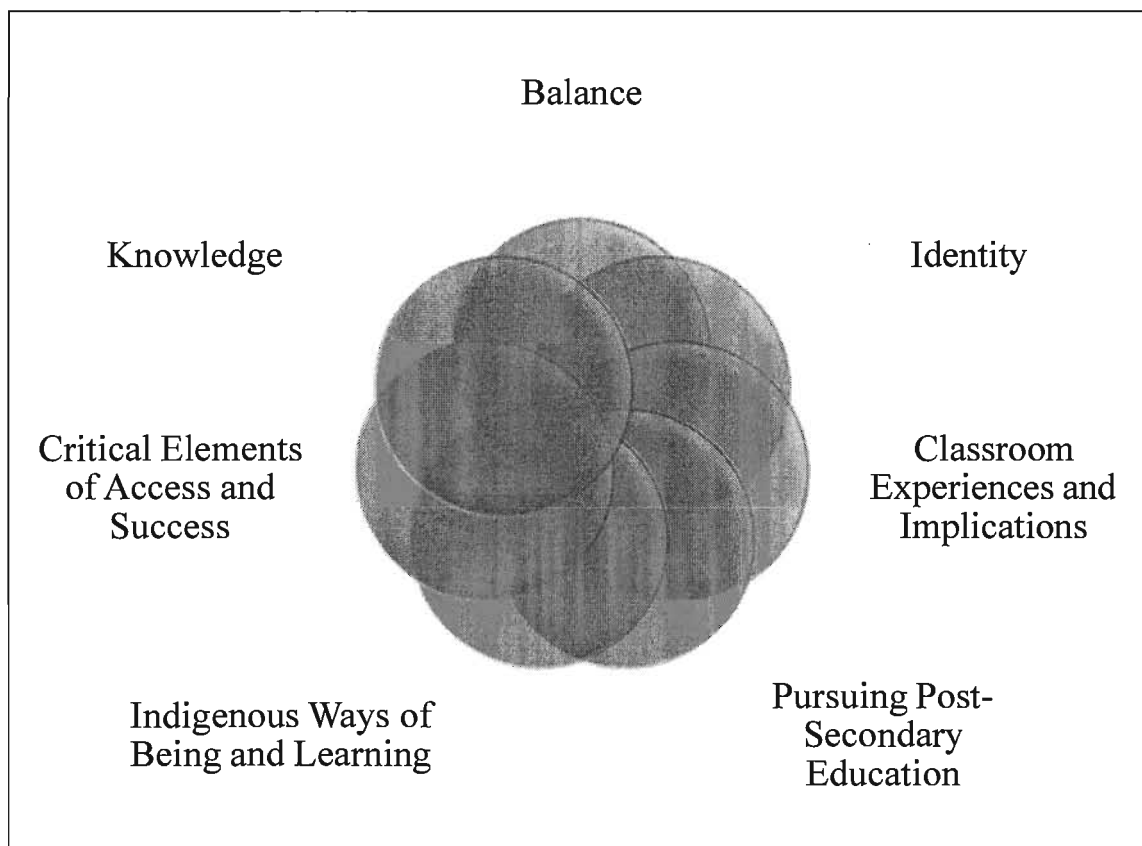
In this chapter, I present the findings from the Wildfire Gatherings with the “Experts in the Fields” and the “Experts in their Lives.” It is fitting that I present the findings from both Gatherings as they provide insight into the perceptions of the frontline workers and service professionals along with those of the young Aboriginal women themselves. Not only does this provide an in-depth analysis into the experiences of the women’s realities from inner and outer dimensions allowing for a holistic understanding, but it also demonstrates where the perceptions and the expertise of both groups align and where they differ.

Seven themes emerged from my analysis of the data. I analyzed the two Wildfire Gatherings separately by allowing the themes to emerge from the data. Through my coding of the data the tree nodes easily fit into the same seven themes for both groups. While the corresponding subthemes differ slightly from the perspectives and expertise presented in the gatherings, the overarching themes are the same. This is important because it gives credibility to the research findings and it speaks to the urgent need of a university access program for Aboriginal women.

Throughout my analysis of the data, it became apparent that the Wildfire Gatherings complemented each other as many of the barriers that were identified by the “Experts in their Lives” corresponded with the recommendations offered by “Experts in the Fields.” This is very interesting considering that the Wildfire Gatherings were completely separate and the participants did not have access to the data from the other Gathering.

The seven themes that emerged from the data are: Balance, Identity, Classroom Experiences and Implications, Pursuing Postsecondary Education, Indigenous Ways of Being and Learning, Knowledge, and Critical Elements of Access and Success (see Figure 3). These themes, although discussed individually, are interconnected and shape the educational experiences of Aboriginal women in complex ways.

Overall, the Wildfire Gatherings offered in-depth and rich data about the experiences of Aboriginal women in education, and the services necessary for their access to and success within university. While Wildfire Gathering 1 involved the Experts in the Fields, including frontline workers and cultural advisors from the six major elements of success for accessible education of Aboriginal woman, as revealed through my educational narrative, (i.e., Housing, Funding, Childcare, Academic Support, Cultural Education, and Cultural Student Support), this group also included a number of Aboriginal women who themselves had also faced many barriers in their education and have successfully transitioned into professional positions. Their contributions in the gathering were particularly meaningful as they provided rich data about the experiences of Aboriginal women in education from lived experiences and they were able to complement the data from the “Experts in Their Lives” who participated in Wildfire Gathering 2. The narratives from these women in Wildfire Gathering 1 and the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 were strikingly similar along with my own. As a participant and facilitator in Wildfire Gathering 2, I found the closeness of these stories to be incredibly powerful. Likewise, it was apparent that the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 found the connection among narratives to be powerful as well. Wildfire Gathering 2 essentially



*Figure 4.* Seven themes.

became a venue in which the women were able to build off one another's stories, and see themselves reflected in one another.

As Aboriginal women are often alienated in university institutions, the ability to see themselves and their experiences reflected in one another may serve not only as a source of empowerment, but also a source of comfort for the women enabling a relationship of trust. During Wildfire Gathering 2, the women openly disclosed their educational narratives, allowing strong emotion to surface. The laughter, the tears, and the support that took place during the Gathering demonstrated the extent of comfort that the women gained through the exchange. The Elder was there to offer support and guidance, and throughout the gathering the women, in turn, also began to offer support and guidance to one another allowing the gathering to become very much a circle of support.

As I have already outlined the sources of expertise that characterized the participant group from Wildfire Gathering 1, I will now offer a brief general description of the participants from Wildfire Gathering 2, ensuring that all identifiers are removed. For reasons associated with confidentiality, descriptors for the participants in Wildfire Gathering 1 will not be provided. This is extremely important as the participants all come from the same community and may easily be identified.

*Kim:* Kim describes her childhood educational experience as “not a good experience from the beginning.” Kim moved around a lot as a child. She continues by describing her high school experience as one in which she did not finish high school and found herself in a lot of trouble. She also points out that she did not have a community and that they were “all just kind of disconnected and trying to survive...it was really tough.” Kim

became a teenage Mother and worked at a low-paying job. With the knowledge that she would receive band funding for postsecondary education, Kim eventually went to college. Kim describes her identity during college as a time when she acknowledged that “Yes. Yes I am Native...but I couldn’t give you any educational conversation about it.” Kim continued from college into an undergraduate program and wishes to move into a graduate program when she is done. Kim is a Mother, Daughter, Sister, partner, student, and community member.

*Amanda:* Amanda describes her early educational experience as one where she attended a multicultural school. She recalls being sent to the office a lot during high school. Like Kim, Amanda acknowledged “like I was Native but I couldn’t tell you a thing about it.” High school was also described as a time where Amanda sought out her Native culture through the local Native Centre in her community. Amanda, however, points out that she did not identify as being the “other” until college. Amanda, also motivated to do something to better herself, decided to pursue university studies. Amanda is a Mother, Daughter, Sister, partner, student, and community member. At the time of the Wildfire Gathering, Amanda had dropped out of school as a result of the intersecting barriers that hindered her access to and success within university. She indicated, however, that she will return to finish her studies one day.

*Sherry:* Sherry notes that she did not really know what being Native was early in elementary school. Sherry, however, points out that she began to learn a lot about her culture throughout elementary school. She recalls enduring a lot of racism from other students during this time and associates this as being a time “when school started to take a really big turn.” She called home sick all the time and this continued into high school.

Sherry reveals that at this point she began to develop a strong worldview, was aware that the experiences of racism that she faced during school were wrong, and she was more interested in learning about her culture and her teachings than attending school. Like Kim, Sherry eventually dropped out of high school. Sherry is a Mother, Daughter, Sister, partner, and community member.

*Janet:* Janet describes her educational experience as one where she secluded herself from the other children in school. She recalls being ashamed of her Native identity when at school. Like Kim and Sherry, Janet also dropped out of high school. She became pregnant as a teenager and described herself as being a single Mother. Eventually, motivated by her child, Janet went back to finish her high school credits and enrolled in a university program. Janet is a Mother, Daughter, Sister, partner, student, and community member.

### **Balance**

“First Nations believe the eagle flies with a female wing and a male wing, showing the importance of balance between the feminine and the masculine in all aspects of individual and community experiences” (Brant-Castellano, 2009, p. 233).

In the past couple of years I have had the opportunity to attend a number of Indigenous conferences. I have been honoured to sit and listen to the wise words of our Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers. When I sit and listen to these teachings what I learn about is the need to live in balance. Throughout our life journeys, we must maintain balance amongst our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical elements.

I have chosen to talk about the theme of balance first because it is important to begin with that foundation. When we learn to live in balance, our whole being—spiritual,

emotional, intellectual, and physical—provides us with the resiliency and the strength to excel.

Balance was a significant theme throughout both Wildfire Gatherings. While my analysis of the data revealed that the need for balance was critical, the women themselves in Wildfire Gathering 2 spoke about the need for balance and indicated that it is very important in their lives. The need for balance was expressed in numerous ways by the participants. This theme is divided into the following subthemes: Two Worlds, Well-Being and Self-Care, “You Don’t Always Have to Be the Best,” Cultural Time, Learning the Skills, Juggling Responsibilities, and Balance of the Male and Female.

### **Two Worlds**

For Aboriginal students engaged in mainstream education endeavours, there is a need to find a harmonious balance within two very different worldviews. When I asked the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 what kind of topics they would like to have covered in the access program not only did they identify the need for balance, they also articulated the desire to have teachings about balance incorporated into the program. For example, Sherry indicated that she would like to have traditional speakers come in to talk about “walking in two worlds kind of thing; balance.”

Katherine, one of the front-line workers, shared her own struggle with learning to live in balance as an Aboriginal woman who previously attended a mainstream university:

when I went to school one of the hardest things to learn was to live in balance and to learn to accept my culture and to bring my culture into the classroom each and every day, not to be the expert in the classroom but to learn what I could and to

apply it to my own community and to apply it to myself. When I went to school I think the hardest thing was being that one person in the classroom and having the only view was an Aboriginal person a Native person. I know that even people that I had gone to school with it was that learning that balance of there is the cultural aspects but it is also we are coming into a system that is outside of our norms.

(Wildfire Gathering 1)

Similarly, Irene identified her struggle in finding balance when she went back to continue her education:

I think what we struggle with and I know personally as a single Mother that has gone back to school and would like to continue her education is that balance. The opportunity to have balance because I won't ever stop being a Daughter and I won't ever stop being a Mother and those are my priorities and they will always be my priorities so when I make other choices they have to embrace those priorities first so I need an environment to come to that can honour that and has kinship, has tangible supports. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The women's vision of achieving balance while "walking in two worlds" (Sherry) is consistent with many Aboriginal views on education. This vision, for example, aligns with the following words of Elder Elizabeth Mackenzie, "If our children are taught in both worlds equally they will be strong like two peoples" (Tlicho Community Services)

The above words spoken by Elder Elizabeth Mackenzie were adopted by late Chief Jimmy Bruneau who used this vision to advocate for a school in which Aboriginal children would be taught in both worlds equally. The Chief Jimmy Bruneau Regional School located in Edzo, Northwest Territories, was opened in 1971, offering



Kindergarten to Grade 9. In 1991 the school expanded to include Grade 10 and within 3 years offered a full high school program. The mission statement for the school “Strong Like Two Peoples” honours Jimmy Bruneau’s and Elder Elizabeth Mackenzie’s vision of bicultural education. Students are taught by Tlicho teachers, non-Aboriginal teachers, Elders, and community members. They are taught in both cultures with activities that include traditional skills in their natural environment, such as trapping, fishing, and traditional tool making, as well as Tlicho history and politics. The power of the ‘Strong Like Two Peoples’ vision, rests in the success rates of the students. The school has successfully graduated 250 students with a great number of students pursuing postsecondary education. In line with the school’s mission statement and the vision of Chief Jimmy Bruneau, the school encourages students to be ‘strong like two peoples through its bicultural education program (Tlicho Community Services, 2010). Likewise, the participants in this study indicated a desire to find balance within two worlds as a core component of their education program.

### **Well-Being and Self-Care**

According to our Medicine Wheel teachings, it is important to balance our physical well-being with our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual well-being. A holistic understanding of well-being understood in this way acknowledges that health does not only include the physical but also the mental, spiritual, and emotional components of self. Imbalances that exist among these components have been understood in the context of childhood trauma such as the abuses experiences in residential schools (Wilson, 2004). In *Living Well: Aboriginal Women, Cultural Identity and Wellness*, a study conducted by the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence, one Aboriginal woman participant

articulated, “What I’ve found in my life is that everything is in our bodies. All the pain, all the sorrow and stress is in our physical bodies” (Wilson, 2004, p. 11). Wilson concludes that many of the participants in her study, including the woman quoted above, recognized the importance of physical activity in releasing stress and anxiety, and that taking care of our physical bodies and maintaining a balanced well-being includes a balance of all the aspects of self.

The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 also recognized the importance of fitness and nutrition in their overall well-being. When the women in the gathering were asked if a fitness and nutrition program would be beneficial to an access program for Aboriginal women, the participants expressed a strong desire for such a component. Kim indicated that such a fitness nutrition component to the program “would definitely be something of interest” (Wildfire Gathering 2). The women were also very enthusiastic about the idea of participating in fitness classes that incorporated Powwow style dance into a fitness routine. For example, Janet expressed “that would be really cool,” and Kim said “I really like the dance idea.” Moreover, Sherry identified the importance of physical fitness in enhancing one’s general health and overall well-being, “Makes you feel good. Makes you think better. Gives you more energy.” The women’s responses to this question made it clear that while they had a general understanding about the importance of fitness and nutrition, they also had a desire to learn more. For example, Kim articulated the importance of providing women with nutritional factsheets and healthy recipes.

The women also connected the need for a fitness and nutrition component to diabetes, a health issue that is increasingly being referred to as endemic amongst the Aboriginal population. For example, Sherry indicated, “We’re all at risk.” Building off

Sherry's connection from fitness and nutrition to diabetes prevention, Amanda conveyed "there's not usually much for diabetes and diabetes awareness usually...it'll be older adults and nothing's out there for younger people and it's sad." In response to Amanda's frustration, Sherry commented, "Exactly like eat healthy now so we don't get diabetes not wait until it's too late." It was clear that the women were concerned about poor nutrition and the associated health issues amongst themselves, their families, and the greater Aboriginal community.

While the women were enthusiastic about eating a balanced diet, they spoke to the difficulty of eating healthy on campus. Janet pointed out the cost of eating healthy on campus, "yea cause there's been many times on campus where I'm here from like 8 in the morning till 10 at night and I just won't eat until I get home....I just didn't have the money...it costs too much." For Janet, the high prices of campus meals contributed to poor eating habits. Valerie, one of the front-line workers, conceptualized that proper eating habits and taking care of our physical bodies is a skill that needs to be supported and encouraged:

The other skill is how to take care of your body, your physical body and eating correctly and when we go off to university we tend to run by and grab a hamburger and stuff it in our mouths and move but that looking after your physical self is important. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The women participants also mentioned some of the ways that students have taken it upon themselves to assist fellow students who are struggling with the high food prices on campus. Kim mentioned that a number of the students had put their money together to purchase food items, such as canned food, and housed them in the Aboriginal

Student Services Office where they were accessible to Aboriginal students:

It was a donation basis and we weren't looking to make money; we were just looking to provide the students with snacks through the day if they didn't have money then they could purchase you know a can of zoodles and a granola bar for 75 cents and you know that would help them get through the day. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

Overall, the women from Wildfire Gathering 2 were concerned about access to nutrition and demonstrated a desire for affordable healthy food options on campus.

### **“You Don’t Always Have to Be the Best”**

Another topic that was raised during the Wildfire Gathering with the “Experts in their Lives” was the need to acknowledge that “you don’t always have to be the best.” Kim discussed that it took her a long time to realize this, “I think that had I known that...it’s okay not to be the best all the time that I would be just a little bit less stressed I would feel just a little bit more comfortable.” The Elder responded to this by acknowledging the importance of not feeling the need to be on top all of the time but to do the best you can do and be okay with your efforts. Kim also acknowledged all the pressure that comes from grades and the need to be on the top all of the time and to be the best. Kim associated the competitiveness pushed by the mainstream with high levels of stress:

You're so stressed out you know, “I wanna do my master’s and I wanna do my PhD, but if I don’t get these grades then I can’t and then I’m a failure and then my whole family is going to fail.” You know and then you go into this whole circle... but then you pick yourself up and you go...but just that knowledge you know

right from the beginning, you don't have to be the best, just do what you can.

(Wildfire Gathering 2)

Kim's comment also demonstrates the extended pressures unique to Aboriginal students by mentioning the accountability to her family. Oftentimes, Aboriginal students recognize a responsibility to their family and to the Aboriginal community at large and this responsibility gives rise to additional pressures associated with high levels of achievement based on grades and the need to be the best.

### **Cultural Time**

Through the process of writing this thesis, I have had many obstacles "get in the way" and have, at times, felt that these things have prevented me from moving forward which has been very discouraging. These events have led me to doubt myself and my place as a graduate student. I was reminded by a colleague that the Creator will guide me and when it is time for me to write, I will write. I have also had a number of reminders of the need to take time for ceremony. These simple reminders have been a source of strength for me providing me with the direction to move forward in a good way. Throughout this process I have made a commitment to Ka'nikonhrí:io shá:wi (to do this with a "good mind"). This commitment has assisted me in striving to find a harmonious balance between my work and the need for *cultural time*.

When I reflect on this past year and make a mental note of all of the things I have taken part in and accomplished, I know that I have been moving forward in a good way. I have taken time out for culture and ceremony and the experiences I have had are immeasurable as they have strengthened my own developing cultural identity. This year, for example, I have attended a number of Indigenous conferences and workshops such as

the Indigenous Peoples Conference at Trent University, I have attended the Traditional Speakers Series here at Brock University along with my children, I have participated in a program as a member of Ohnia:kara Native Drum and Dance Group by performing at the local Catholic schools in partnership with the Catholic School Board of Niagara, I have also began to attend and participate in Longhouse ceremony along with my children, and, finally, I have made an effort to begin learning the Mohawk language and pass on what I am learning to my children. Along with these experiences, I have and continue to participate in regular community events held through the local Native Friendship Centres and the Southern Ontario Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative (SOADI). The above experiences have assisted me to develop and grow both culturally and spiritually and I have been able to incorporate these teachings into my thesis. When I sit back and reflect on the things I have accomplished while simultaneously working on my thesis, I can see a strong balance between my academic work and “cultural time.” This is important. While it is so valuable to my thesis that I partake in the above cultural activities and keep a good mind throughout this work, it is also very time consuming. I feel very privileged that I have been able to take the time to participate and engage in such activities but I am also well aware that achieving balance between academic study (with the time commitments and deadlines it entails) and “cultural time” (that is not associated with time constraints) can be very difficult.

The women also spoke about the difficulty in balancing cultural activity or not having the time to engage in cultural activities. Kim expressed her reluctance to engage in cultural activities such as dance:

I’ve always been told that to dance traditionally you have to be taught and it’s

very time consuming and you gotta learn all the stories you know and I know that I don't have the resources or the time or the people to teach me that so If I could just learn some. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

In response, Janet described her experience:

Once you're out there you're learning and you're constantly learning as you go. Like I've learned stuff from [community members] and my Sister and your dance style is also your own. Yes there is protocol and proper treatment of your outfit but it all comes and people will help, but you gotta put it out there that you want to do it; you gotta take the initiative. So that would be one thing, is that type of workshop, if someone's interested in having an outfit or learning more about that...cause our sons, like if we don't have that how do we know how to dress them and how to make their outfits if we're only familiar with our own. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

Janet's contribution also demonstrates the desire for workshops that allow the women to learn about cultural activities, such as Powwow dancing, and the protocols of these activities. She connects this to having the ability to pass these teachings on to our children.

### **Learning the Skills: Survival Skills, Time Management, and Prioritizing**

During Wildfire Gathering 1, the need for women to learn to balance their time and prioritize their intersecting responsibilities was identified as a critical life skill.

Katherine articulated:

One of the things, and it touches on that whole aspect of teachings and bringing information to these young women or older women, but it is life skills. And not so

much to just speak about traditions, but about balancing their time, learning what is expected when it comes to essays and note taking and all of those things.

[Those] are huge barriers when it is your first year of school and you need to know how to do those things properly. And if there are tutors that could come in, and if there are peer groups that could be set up all of those things are going to help them in their first year and in their next transitional year. So I think that is the life skills. And if you think about time management, you know we have people that have children, and we have people that have work, so they might have another part-time job or they might have a full-time job. And then where does their personal care time come in? So they are going to have to know how to manage this whole new world that they are putting themselves into.

While Katherine spoke to the need for women to learn these life skills to balance their many intersecting roles with academic expectations, Ilene revealed that balance must also come from outside the individual. She discussed the importance of having the opportunity to balance the varied and intersecting roles of being a Mother and Daughter along with academic responsibilities:

Those are my priorities and they will always be my priorities so when I make other choices they have to embrace those priorities first. So I need an environment to come to that can honour that and has kinship, has tangible supports where the environment and that community within those doors that I walk....I need to know that that community understands that and respects that. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 also attested to the need of the university (professors and administrators) to have an understanding of everything the women bring



with them and honour the priorities that the women have. This leads into the next subtheme in which the participants mention their overlapping responsibilities between family and education.

### **Juggling Responsibilities**

The need to find balance among all of the multifaceted roles that the women carry was raised in both Wildfire Gatherings. The women expressed that finding this balance is a challenge in which they make negotiations through juggling their overlapping responsibilities. Janet pointed out how she squeezes in some of her academic reading during “story time” before putting her child to bed. Kim talked about the struggle with the professors and instructors assuming that students have “all the time in the world” and not considering some of their family priorities.

The participants were eager to learn about traditional teachings about balancing their many responsibilities. Kim mentioned the desire to learn traditional family values that may assist her to balance her roles as a Mother and a Daughter. “My Mother is aging and so now I face the responsibility of trying to take care of her as well as my own children so traditional ways of doing that or different support systems for that.” While the women discussed their overlapping responsibilities as a significant challenge to their educational success, they expressed a desire to learn traditional ways of balancing those responsibilities.

### **Balance of the Male and Female**

The promise of the future lies in restoring the balance, continuing to dismantle the barriers to full and equitable participation of women in community life, and creating the conditions where male and female gifts can come together to make

powerful medicine and heal individuals, families, communities, and nations.

(Brant-Castellano, 2009, p. 231)

Traditional Aboriginal societies acknowledge the need for balance between the male and the female energies. As such, traditional roles and responsibilities of men and women are viewed as egalitarian and equally beneficial to the survival of the community. Ilene reveals the need for positive male role models for the women, giving consideration to those who may not have this in their environment, and suggesting that this is critical for their children:

It might be a good idea to look at encouraging some really positive male role models and male supports and that could look a number of different ways: it could be instructors, it could be Elders, it could be all sorts of different things...to achieve that balance. I know that we are fortunate to have men, strong healthy men in our environment and it brings something very special to that environment. And our women have experienced trauma and negative experiences and they have shared with me that that has helped them to heal, to have something positive to balance that out and also for the young children, I feel very strongly about having that balance in their environment. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Correspondingly, the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 were asked about their views on bringing male role models into an access program designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal women and families. Their responses indicated that the women were not only comfortable with this but they also embraced the idea and felt that it was very important for their children. The women responded in this way:

Janet: I think it would be a good thing.

Amanda: Some of us have men in our lives, little men (boy children). It would be nice to see if we bring our families in here what it would be like to have a good male role model in the community.

Janet: What would you expect of our sons?

Amanda: Yea exactly especially since we're shaping them into men.

Janet: And we really don't have any grounds to go on there.

This topic of incorporating male role models was revisited later in the gathering and Amanda had the following to contribute:

So that should be part of our mandate then to take in consideration that this is for women but we know that in balance that we do have a man's role and we're going to have that representation whether it will be a man mentor there whether it would be um workshops with men involved that this is for women but we know that hand in hand that...this is where change starts right. I think it's good.

Through this discussion with the women, the benefits of incorporating male role models into the program for the women and their children became very apparent.

### **Identity**

The term "identity" alone is complex. As an Aboriginal woman, identity shapes my life in multiple dimensions. From the Moment I was born I had an associated political identity. I am identified externally through government policy: The Indian Act of 1876. This Act defines my political association with this land known as Canada and it outlines and regulates my land entitlements and my community affiliations. My children are not eligible under the Indian Act to be "card-carrying Indians" meaning they do not have Indian status and by extension are not externally identified in the same way as I am. As a

result, my children do not have the same land entitlements and community affiliations as I do. The repercussions of this policy have had serious impacts on the way Aboriginal communities have come to identify and put their own restrictions on the way Aboriginal peoples are identified. As the following states, these repercussions are more severe for Aboriginal women.

The Indian Act, passed in Canada in 1876, defined Indian identity and prescribed what “Indianness” meant. Because of the sexist specification inherent in this legislation, ramifications of the Indian Act were more severe for Aboriginal women than men, ramifications that continue to have severe impacts on our life chances today....The Indian Act has controlled Aboriginal identity by creating legal and non-legal categories that have consequences for rights and privileges both within and beyond Aboriginal communities. (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb & Hampton, 2009, p. 296)

The award-winning documentary *Mohawk Girls* (Deer, 2006) highlights the way this legislation has divided the community of Kahnawake. This film reveals the story of three young Mohawk women who face issues of identity, community, and family as they are tied to strict legislation manifested in colonial influence. As a result of colonial influence, our political identity is very much connected to the ways in which we have come to identify culturally and the connections we have to our home community. Thus, there is a connection between the way we are defined by external powers and the way we define ourselves. Identity and cultural identity, however, change continually as we become more grounded in our traditions, and begin to decolonize through the reclamation of our language and ceremonies.

Identity is an important theme in this study because the ways in which the participants identify themselves is connected to self-image and perceived potentialities and capabilities. While this research presumes that the strengthening of identity will lead to self-empowerment, and increased educational success, and enhanced overall well-being, it is important to acknowledge the multifaceted identities that each participant carries within. It is also important to understand identity formatives that shape the ways in which the women view themselves politically, culturally, and socially.

The women who participated in the study all share in common barriers associated with the intersection of Motherhood and student but, on the other hand, they also discuss in depth the unique barriers that they face as they are relevant to identity, how they define themselves, and how they are defined by those around them. This theme is divided into the following subthemes: Educational Experiences Associated with Political and Cultural Identity, Strong Worldview, Strengthening Identities, Diverse Nations: Finding your own Culture, Shame, Internal Shame and Cultural Disconnectedness, Social Identity, and Reflection and Visual Representation.

### **Educational Experiences Associated with Political and Cultural Identity**

The following story offered by Kim reveals a number of issues associated with political and cultural identity. First, it reveals the need for a political awareness of self; second, it reveals the need for cross-cultural understanding and acceptance; and third, it suggests how one's political and cultural identity can intersect:

I started college but everybody was “oh you’re Native you’re Native” and yes.

Yes I am Native, but I don’t know, I couldn’t tell you anything about myself. I

just know that I’m Native, and I know the struggles that I’ve went through, and I

know what I've seen. I know what I've experienced and I know what my Mom went through, but I couldn't give you any educational conversation about it....One teacher had decided to single me out in my class and she said "Well Kim you get free schooling don't you? Can you tell us why?"....I was so infuriated because I didn't know, I knew but I didn't know. I didn't know how to defend myself. And I could hear the people around me start "Oh my goodness she gets free schooling" and I could feel the looks behind me and I could feel the entire class just kind of stop and look at me and it was mortifying. I just sat there and I looked at my teacher and I was like "are you kidding me like why would you do this to me I can't say anything in response to this." So afterwards I went to her...and I had asked her "why did you do that to me? Like why would you single me out like that?" And she asked me "well do you know how to respond to that do you know anything about your background your history of being a Native?" And I honestly couldn't say I did I didn't know anything. She goes "well you know I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that, but maybe you should start looking into that stuff so when you are asked these questions you do know how to respond." And as angry as I was at her, cause I was really angry, I went and discovered the Native office at the college and started going in there. I started reading more. I started looking into it more; I started attending more Native events so I took it as a positive. I took that very negative experience and turned it into a positive for myself. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

For Kim, her negative experience became very much a motivating force for her to search out her "Native" identity. Amanda also shared her story about coming to realize her need

to understand her Native identity.

I think it wasn't till high school that I started attending Niagara Regional Native Centre going to youth group, meeting other Native [youth], hanging out with them, learning more about my culture. That that's where it was stemming from. All my issues that I didn't realize I had were being brought up. Realizing that I didn't know who I was, like Kim, like I was Native but I couldn't tell you a thing about it. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

While the women shared these stories of identity and coming into their identity, through their stories they also revealed their responses to challenging situations that demonstrate resistance, resiliency, and a strong awareness of self. Their responses are offered in the following subtheme that I have entitled Strong Worldview.

### **Strong Worldview**

The following pieces from the women's stories shared in Wildfire Gathering 2 demonstrate their own awareness of educational experiences that they knew were not right. Sherry explains that, while her resistance to culturally challenging experiences began in elementary school, by high school she had a very strong worldview and continued to resist by not attending her classes:

So then that's when school started taking a really big turn with me, like I pretend I was sick and then I'd call home all the time. I'd want to go home. And in high school it was the same thing; I was more, I was really interested in my culture, and I really had a strong worldview already by that point. And the experiences that I went through in the classroom and at school, I knew they weren't right and I knew I didn't agree with them. I knew what felt right to me, I knew where I

wanted to be, I knew what I wanted to be doing and it just it didn't feel right to be there. So I hardly ever went to my classes which was really bad.

Janet described an experience she encountered in university where she felt she was treated unreasonably.

I was absolutely shocked and appalled that someone like that is educating other people that would take that stance and say "drop my class." And it was because of him actually [acknowledging her baby] like because I had him at the end of September. And like I was feeling pretty good because I had just gotten caught up in all my courses and I hadn't missed any work in [her class] yet but there was a huge assignment coming up....She never explained her reasoning or anything like that. She said "well you should drop my class" in the middle of the lecture hall, in front of everybody and I was just like "oh okay" so I left.

The women also demonstrated resistance through the ways they responded to the aforementioned negative experiences. Kim voiced how she took her negative experience and made it into a positive:

That was one thing where I felt definitely singled out and I couldn't respond. And I felt so stupid in a sense, but because of that I've been able to reach out and start connecting with the Native community around me and teach my children you know Native culture. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

It was apparent throughout the circle that all of the women felt that it was important to expose their children to cultural teachings. It is worth noting that while the women revealed that they did not really know much about their "Native" identity in elementary school (Sherry), high school (Amanda), and college (Kim), all of the women talked



openly about the importance of their children having a strong cultural identity.

The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 also demonstrated having a strong awareness of self in that they recognized the need for an access program designed to meet the immediate and unique challenges Aboriginal women face in pursuing postsecondary education. In discussing the need for an access program for Aboriginal women, the participants responded with the following:

Kim: I think you have the right focus. I think women really do need this service.

Amanda: And if for once though can I be so blunt but say can we think about ourselves...and anything else is going to continue to grow and evolve and we do.

We have spoken and said that we would like to have different programs where we want to incorporate our spouses, our Sisters, our Brothers, but nevertheless is our main focus not the fact that right now Sister to Sister saying that we are the main focal group? It's hard it's hard for us to sit back and say for a change that I'm not going to put anyone else first I'm going to put myself first. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

In the above statement Amanda acknowledges the tendency of Aboriginal women to put themselves on the back burner, while they make sure everyone else's needs are taken care of first. Amanda recognizes, however, that it is important for women to take care of themselves so that they are in a better position to take care of their families and strengthen their communities.

Sherry also illustrated how her own awareness of Aboriginal women's issues with respect to education had been enhanced through the Wildfire Gathering. She demonstrated her understanding of the need for the access program by noting "the

statistics show it” in reference to the statistics that the women collectively read earlier in the Wildfire Gathering.

### **Strengthening Identities**

During Wildfire Gathering 2 the Elder spoke about the need to be strong in your identity and the importance of self-acceptance:

I think you have to be solid and easy and feel good about your own identity before you can pass anything out to anybody else you know, but...if you know who you are and you accept yourself you're sailing....Nothing can possibly take that away from you or make you feel that you're inferior cause you're safe within yourself. But that comes with years as well you know. But you girls are all pretty well at the point where you're really women, you're not really girls anymore, and you know and you have to step up to the plate. Take your lumps but carry on.

The Elder also spoke to the women about the need to understand their current realities. She relates herself to the women in the Gathering by sharing her own story in a way that encourages the women and reminds them of the need to honour themselves throughout their educational endeavors:

And the more you know, like the more you understand where you are at in life the stronger you, are and the more you can do for yourself and your children. It took me 7 years to get my B.A. but I stuck to and got it, and it was part time, and there were many times when I thought “what am I doing? What am I doing this for?” And suddenly a little voice said, “for you for yourself cause you're going to feel good about it and say I did it.” But oh raising five kids and you know... knowing who you are and knowing how your ancestors and your Grandmothers ...are

behind you....When you are in tune with your culture your ancestors are really right there, and if you just kind of think about them....They do help they do give you that energy or feeling that it's okay. I'm going to make it cause they made it in their way and look at how hard it was for them. So they're still right there you know waiting for you to call and say "help Grandma, Grandpa" you know your Kokum and you Mookum they're right there and you know that's all you need.

(Wildfire Gathering 2)

In this way the Elder encouraged the women to honour themselves as individuals, and to understand their current struggles and where they are at in their lives. She also reminded them that it is okay to ask for help from their ancestors. Finally, this encourages the women to be strong in their identity as Aboriginal women by noting the importance of asking for that spiritual guidance in their own way.

### **Diverse Nations: Finding your own Culture**

"We are like a garden with all different flowers" (Wildfire Gathering 1).

Valerie shed light on some of the difficulties that students may face in their attempts to become grounded within their cultural identity.

I think that it is really, really important that people everywhere realize that we are Nations of people and we are not Aboriginal people. We are Haudenosaunee, Nishnaabe, Mushkegowuk, and Salish you know, that is who we are. We are not Aboriginal people and there isn't really an Aboriginal culture, there isn't an Aboriginal language and I think for individuals, I think it is really important that they know who they are and that is a very difficult thing when you teach or are doing language and culture because there are so many but I have found it very

difficult when people approach me like there is an Aboriginal culture. There's not.

(Wildfire Gathering 1)

In Wildfire Gathering 1, the Elder also noted the importance of “knowing who you are.” However, she speaks to the importance of understanding the meaning of culture amongst Aboriginal peoples and from those commonalities moving outwards towards one's own distinct cultural practices.

Carly: Well I was going to say that what I read about culture today to us is we have to know also the meaning of culture and culture to Aboriginal people is ceremonies, dance, music, and your extended family. You have to know who you are; you know you can't ...just because you are an Aboriginal person maybe for us who live in an urban area is much more difficult because we are like a garden with all different flowers. We are all Aboriginal but we all have a little bit of different ways of doing things yet we all do our ceremonies, we all do our dances and our drums but in a little different way. The water drum for the Haudenosaunee, the round drums, the big drums we do things a little differently but really if that could be taught to everybody then you would never lose your culture, never.

John: So is it fair to say then because truly we can't really say who is going to come into this program, whether they are Nishnaabe, Métis or Haudenosaunee, Cree. Anyone can come in so are we saying then, are you suggesting then that we should be looking for commonalities in cultures?

Carly: In a sense because once you start that then you look for your own.

Michelle shares an experience of one of her students as a way to affirm the importance of providing an “Aboriginal centre” that allows a safe environment for students to move towards their own culture by embracing cultural commonalities.

Some of the students that we see...are coming into understanding their culture, who they are for the first time. I kind of think you know how in university you have two-spirited youth come out for the first time because it is the first time that they leave home and they are in a safe environment where they can kind of come out right? It is a similar kind of thing for some Aboriginal students when they come to university and they are away from home for the first time.... We have this student who...never identified as Aboriginal in high school because it just wasn't safe, it just wasn't good and who was distanced from her family, had grown up with her non-Aboriginal Mother but not her Father...and it wasn't really safe or comfortable for her at that point in high school but when she came to university low and behold she discovers that there is an Aboriginal centre and then she sees our big honking tepee that we put up on the middle of the lawn in orientation week right and she feels like okay this is something that belongs to me and I want to learn more about it and becomes...a part of that community and the family that we created there. So you can create these kind of families by the heart which welcome back those people who have been dispossessed...and don't have the courage to go back to that particular family or community but can start by going into the community that we created, which you know it is multinational because we cover different [nations] and sort of allowed her to creep back towards where it is that she belongs. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

While Michelle establishes the important role that “Aboriginal Centres” play in encouraging individuals to become grounded within their own culture, she also reveals the need for a safe, welcoming environment to offset any fears or barriers that the students may carry with them into that environment.

### **Shame**

Shame occurs from incidents in which the women have felt a lack of understanding from others outside their cultural sharing group. This shame manifests itself in an uncomfortable feeling, a feeling of nonbelonging, and a feeling of being the "other." It results in alienation, and cultural repression. It is reasonable to assume that these feelings stem from a lifetime of experiences in which exposure to negative stereotypes is commonplace. Such experiences result in identity shame or cultural shame.

For individuals who are part Aboriginal and part non-Aboriginal, these feelings of shame occur in association with both groups. For example, individuals who are part Aboriginal may feel they do not fully belong in Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal circles. For those who have limited cultural knowledge, shame can be associated with a sense of cultural disconnectedness. For many, this cultural disconnect stems from colonization and the repression of our languages, cultures, and spirituality. Janet correlates her experience of being ashamed of herself as stemming from her Grandparent's experience in residential school:

When I was in elementary school I think I kinda had the same stance. We knew we were Native but, well my Grandfather had went to residential school and our family basically at that point said okay let's just pull away from our culture like my Grandmother my Grandfather the entire family basically. So we knew nothing

we didn't indulge in it or learn our language or...well my Grandfather actually... chose not to teach his children the ways because he was scared that they'd get taken away from them like he was from his parents. And so he knew, he knew the English but he never ever, ever, ever spoke cause he refused to speak the language that was not his. But he also did not know his own language anymore well enough to speak it. So we always knew if he spoke we were in for it....That was why we had pulled away from it but when we were in school and we kind of secluded ourselves from the rest of the children because we were embarrassed we were ashamed of ourselves. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

Janet's experience demonstrates the intergenerational impact that the residential school system had on our families. It also points out the way in which shame and cultural disconnectedness have come to exist and continue to perpetuate one another. This trend will be discussed further below.

### **Internal Shame and Cultural Disconnectedness**

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Michelle connects her experience of feeling ashamed as she was coming to learn more about her own culture. Her shame came from her lack of knowledge and the way some individuals are quick to attack others for doing something "the wrong way."

In my own journey I felt so ashamed because I didn't know this or I didn't know that and people beat up on you because you don't speak your language and you know you don't know your culture and you don't know anything and you go the wrong way around a circle or whatever. We can't do that to our youth because a lot of them are coming from places where they don't know those things and I've seen a lot of abuse that happens under the guise of you know we are being

traditional, we are doing this and we are doing that and that is not a way to welcome our youth back into the circle and that is not a way to make them feel empowered so we have to respect every personal experience that people have and then work with that and be open to it and listen to it.... We have to respect where people are coming from and acknowledge that they bring something and being gentle with them because that is the other thing when I think about some of the shaming experiences that I had when I was trying to come back and learn more about culture and you know going through more pan-Aboriginal stuff because that's where I started and recognizing that the kind of teaching that my Father offered was very kind and gentle and I think that's how, that a good model for if we really want to be traditional, that's how we work with our young people and that is how we teach and we respect them and we listen to them. I think it's important to remember that when we are trying to set up services that are accessible because people are scared coming into these things in a lot of instances anyone is scared, going into a new environment is scary right so I always tell our students or staff when people come in go up and greet them and try and find a way to make them feel welcome and try and find a way to give them something to do, make them feel useful, make them feel a part of this place right? And don't make them feel ashamed that they don't fit in somehow because you already feel the guilt coming in.

This piece is a really important piece because Kim touches on the issue of shame as a barrier for individuals wanting to learn more about their culture; people feel ashamed



because they do not know but when they come into an environment to learn, they may also face being “shamed.” Janice connects incidents of shaming to school leaving.

Well I think that we have people who have left school for those very reasons as well so it is important, the isolation, the loneliness, the sense of disconnect not being accepted, not being reflected or whatever so aside from being a non-barrier to the loving, gentle and welcoming it’s also a barrier when it is not there so the loneliness and isolation. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

While shame is very much a result of forced cultural suppression through early government policies and discriminatory legislations and, as a consequence, has led to many Aboriginal peoples resisting their own cultural ways, it has now become a quandary for those who want to learn and reclaim those cultural ways. It is, therefore, critical that those wanting to learn and reclaim their cultural identity are not shamed and pushed away but are instead encouraged and supported. Michelle reveals that it is important to:

Take what our Elders tell us and honour that but again also honour ourselves for where we are at and not feel ashamed of these things that we need to do to survive as well, especially for young women because I think the thing is with a lot of the traditional stuff that has come in...other instances where I have seen it is like a lot of the prescriptions come down upon the women like the way that you need to dress and the way that you need to listen and you need to do that and it is really difficult to navigate your way through that given the reality of the situations that we are in such as single Mothers and all of those other types of things so we have to remember that I think even talking about kinship and recognizing that those

systems that we are talking about traditionally they don't exist for a lot of urban Mothers and how do we take those beautiful teachings that we have and of the ways of people that lived in the generation of Elders that we talk about right because their generation had a different reality at the same time, and same as the one before. They all had different ways and different things that they were always telling people so I especially think for women that we always get told so much about how we are supposed to behave and we need to be conscious of that especially with young women or women. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Here, Michelle points out how some of the realities of young women make it difficult for them when they are engaging in cultural activities. She points out the need for young women to be guided and their realities to be honoured, rather than to be pushed away.

### **Social Identity**

I have chosen the term social identity in reference to the ways in which the women have identified socially with respect to their relationships and responsibilities to others. This includes being a Mother, Daughter, partner, community member, and so on.

While the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 were not asked to make reference to their social identity specifically, this came about in their introductions. In the interests of confidentiality, I have chosen not to include their introductions verbatim. The following, however, is a summary of their introductions to illustrate how they identified socially. Sherry introduced herself in her traditional language and explained to the circle her Native name. She then identified her Nation, Clan, and home community. She then identified as being a Mother. Amanda also identified herself using her Native language. She identified her Nation, Clan, and home community and she continued by identifying

herself as a Mother. Kim also began in her Native language and identified her Nation. She also identified her children and then identified herself as a student and mentioned her future plans. Janet identified herself with her Native name and meaning, she identified her home community, and she then identified her children, their Native names and meanings, and she also identified herself as a student.

All of the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 identified as being Mothers of young children and this was a strong component of their identity. Motherhood and the associated priorities, responsibilities, and barriers relevant to education came up throughout the Gathering and will be revisited later throughout the chapter as appropriate. In Wildfire Gathering 1, Ilene reveals the ways in which social relations, such as Motherhood, are priorities before all else:

I won't ever stop being a Daughter and I won't ever stop being a Mother and those are my priorities and they will always be my priorities so when I make other choices they have to embrace those priorities first so I need an environment to come to that can honour that and has kinship, has tangible supports. (Wildfire Gathering 1)<sup>1</sup>

Ilene also notes how Mothers often make sacrifices for their children:

I would also say one thing that I know about Moms. Being a Mom and working with Moms and being in that circle is we make sacrifices so that our children will do more than survive they will thrive and have every opportunity that there is

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to reuse this quote as it applies to both the theme of Balance and Identity. This very quote speaks to the need to have balance among intersecting identity roles. The interconnectedness of this very quote as it relates to balance and identity reveal how the themes themselves are so intricately interconnected to another much like the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical components of self.

wouldn't it be nice if we could offer that to women as well and not just for the next generation, for both because that is the best model (Wildfire Gathering 1). Aboriginal women carry with them these multifaceted identities into and throughout their educational experiences. As Ilene states above "I won't ever stop being a Mother and those are my priorities", the women participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 will not ever stop being Mothers and, as such, they also carry with them associated priorities. The women's stories and contributions in the Gathering made it evident that those are their priorities as well and that those priorities must come before anything else.

### **Reflection and Visual Representation**

The next subtheme of identity, reflection and visual representation, arose from Wildfire Gathering 1. Janice noted that as a First Nations woman coming into the university, it is important to see a visual representation of herself reflected somewhere within the institution. She associates visual representation to value:

One of the things for the vision which bounces off earlier comments is inclusive of reflection, reflecting the variety, the diverseness of our Nations so to be able to come to the university and be able to access a program where there is diversity and I see myself reflected when I come in and that also speaks to value so to value myself, me as a Native woman or First Nations woman coming into the university, I want to see myself reflected somewhere. I would like to see myself welcomed somewhere; I would like to see just the visual entrance first of all. Some kind of visual thing that we are here you know would be a great starting point. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Likewise, Michelle notes that "having a presence on campus is really important

because they need to see that there is an Aboriginal presence on campus and then creating this home” (Wildfire Gathering 1). Michelle also identifies the need for Indigenous faculty:

The other thing about that presence you know and no offense intended but you go into the halls of these institutions but it is a whole bunch of old White guys on the walls you know on those framed pictures right? You do not see a presence of [Indigenous] people in those upper levels of authority so we can have all this wonderful student support but if we don’t see people in those kinds of positions and teaching and also who do the students go to when they need support?

Correspondingly, the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 affirmed this lack of advocacy within the academic and upper levels of authority of the university resulting in their tendency to walk away and avoid issues without seeking further support.

### **Classroom Experiences and Implications**

While the narratives offer rich and meaningful data about the educational realities of Aboriginal women with reference to numerous influences, such as historical, familial, social, and cultural, that shape those realities, this theme is specific to the classroom experiences of the participants. This theme is divided into the following subsections: Teacher-to-Student Relationships, Irrelevant and Insensitive Curriculum, Becoming the “Other,” and Classroom Experiences Defined as Experiences of Racism.

#### **Teacher-to-Student Relationships**

Perhaps one of the most appalling themes that came out of Wildfire Gathering 2 was teacher and student relationships. On one hand, as a student who has gone through very similar negative classroom experiences, I should not be surprised by the descriptions

put forth by some of the participants. On the other hand, however, it is still very shocking and difficult to hear these young determined women describe negative classroom experiences that stem from teacher-to-student relationships. All 4 of the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 shared very negative experiences that stemmed from a dysfunctional teacher-to-student relationship between themselves and their teachers. During Wildfire Gathering 2, Janet described her frustration with one of her professors:

When she said that I was just...absolutely shocked and appalled that someone like that is educating other people....she never explained her reasoning or anything like that she said well you should drop my class in the middle of the lecture hall in front of everybody. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

Janet understood her professor's direction to drop her class to be a result of her bringing her month-old baby to lecture. Janet explains that she had consulted with her professors prior to giving birth and the professors had all assured their support. As her above experience reveals, however, she did not receive support she was promised. Amanda describes a similar experience when she was running late and had brought her son to class because she was not able to bring him to childcare in time for the lecture. She recalls being centered out in class, "I started crying and I packed up everything....He yelled at me and I had to walk out and yea it was hard and it intimidates you" (Wildfire Gathering 2).

### **Irrelevant and Insensitive Curriculum**

The following piece shared by Katherine in Wildfire Gathering 1 affirms the in-class barriers that Aboriginal students face with respect to irrelevant and insensitive curriculum:

A huge barrier that I noticed, and I know that certain classmates that I went to school with [also noted], was not so much the services within the school, but with the faculty and the level of education that they were teaching in those classrooms. So it's great to be welcomed by Aboriginal students services, and it is great to be having a welcoming centre, but once you walk out those doors and you walk into a classroom and you learn about Aboriginal people or Native people being conquered, and then the values of Aboriginal people in economics and how they spend their money, and the corruption in band offices and things like that.... There are certain aspects which are glorified, whether they are in a textbook or they are being said by a teacher. That is where they are facing the barriers.... "I'm here to learn about the social aspect, and I'm going to do my hardest, and I'm going to do it for my family, and I'm going to do it for my community" but then you are sitting in a classroom and you are being taught a history that is not yours, a history that does not belong to us, because it is not from our perspective. It is not the truth and that is shameful. So... that Aboriginal Education Council that is here at Brock, should be reviewing some of that literature that is being taught in those classes and how it is being taught, and ensuring that when a teacher or when a faculty member has a topic coming up, and we know it is very skim and scarce when it comes up, but when it does come up that they do have experts that can speak to it, and this can be our Elders. This can be our professionals that come into the classroom and teach that perspective, and not just the textbook because we know that the textbooks are wrong, and they are not reflective of who we are. So that I think is a barrier because once it is said that Aboriginal people are

conquered then you start to feel as if you're conquered, because you may not have that voice in first year.... You will have that voice by your fourth year because your critical mind is just going nuts, but when you are in your first year and they start to teach these things it makes you feel like "who am I? Do they even know who I am? Do they even respect who I am?" And as a student you don't want to be an expert. You are there to learn, and you don't want to be the one person that you know, even if you're dark skinned or anything that your teacher comes to you and says "hey, what do you think" because you are a Native person. You are there to learn.... I know from things that I have gone through... where I sat in classes and just felt angry because of what was being taught, and I know from my own experience that the first couple of years I just sat there quiet and really [thought] "maybe I'm not visible, maybe I didn't wear my feathers today but how do they not see me? I'm a human being and I'm here".... I sat in those economics class where it was [asked] "What are those Native people spending their money on? You know you go to the reserve and their houses are in shambles but what are they spending their money on?" I don't know if they thought I was Spanish or what, but I am a human being and I'm sitting right here and you are here to learn and your blinders are still on as to what is happening in our communities and who we are as Aboriginal people. So I think it starts with that faculty too. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

While I left Katherine's contribution in its entirety, I think it raises a number of critical issues regarding the barriers students face with irrelevant and insensitive curriculum. First, Katherine affirms that while having an Aboriginal Student Centre is



important, it does not address the barriers that students are facing in the classrooms. Second, these barriers, which I also noted in my educational narrative, are exceedingly troubling because they are hurtful and they contribute significantly to the internalized shame that was discussed in the previous theme. Third, Katherine extends her argument to suggest that the Aboriginal Education Council at Brock review the literature that is being taught in the classrooms and that Aboriginal Elders, historians, and professionals be invited into the classroom to teach cultural truths so that the information that the students are getting is accurate and credible.

The participants from Wildfire Gathering 2 also indicated a desire to learn “real truths” and “real histories.” Amanda expressed that “this is university, this is real. I want to talk with real people about real stories.” Amanda also expressed her frustration with the sensitive material that has been raised in her classes by sharing an experience she had when residential schools were covered in her women’s studies class. She describes being uncomfortable about how the teacher talked about residential schools and being upset that inaccurate information was presented “in a lecture full of tons of people” and it was not coming from an Aboriginal voice.

Overall, the participants from Wildfire Gathering 2 complemented Katherine’s articulation by expressing a desire to have Elders and knowledgeable community members brought in as guest speakers to present truthful and relevant accounts of Aboriginal histories and realities.

### **Becoming the “Other” and Experiencing Tokenism**

A couple of the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 described experiences of oppression that allowed them to come to understand themselves as the “other.” Becoming

the other refers to situations in which someone becomes oppressed as a result of their identified membership to a particular group-racial, gender, cultural, etc. (Graveline, 1998, p. 92). This can take the form of being distinctly centered out in the classroom or it can take the form of being treated differently by teachers or peers as a result of one's Aboriginal identity. Amanda spoke of college as a time in which she distinctly remembers realizing that she was the other, "but college was probably the worst when I started to realize that maybe I was the other." Kim described her experience of becoming the other as "mortifying":

My one teacher had decided to single me out in my class and she said "Well Kim you get free schooling don't you? Can you tell us why?" and I was in the child and youth worker program up at Niagara College and I was so infuriated because I didn't know I knew but I didn't know I didn't know how to defend myself and I could hear the people around me start "Oh my goodness she gets free schooling" and I could feel the looks behind me and I could feel the entire class just kind of stop and look at me and it was mortifying.<sup>2</sup>

### **Classroom Experiences Defined as Experiences of Racism**

This subsection discusses classroom events that are referred to as experiences of racism in school. After giving worthwhile consideration to my use of the term racism, as it is used here, I decided it was best to let the words of the participants inform the presentation of the findings. I also reflected on my own educational narrative where I connected an early educational experience to racism as well. In my analysis I reflected on my own understanding of this term at such a young age. I will elaborate further on my

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<sup>2</sup> Again, I have chosen to use a quotation more than once as it relates to two different themes. This particular quote relates to the theme of Identity as well as Educational Experiences and Implications.

use of the term racism as the heading for this subtheme in the discussion chapter. The following is Sherry's recollection of what she describes as her first experience with racism in the classroom:

Well I didn't really know what being Native was when I was in elementary school and I remember my first experience with racism it was in Grade 4 [with] my Grade 4 teacher. We were learning about money and my teacher held up a loony and he says "anybody know what bird this is on the loony?" and nobody raised their hand. And he said "well Sherry you're Native you should know what kind of bird this is" and I was like "I don't know." I think I said something like a seagull and everyone laughed at me. I didn't make the connection between a loon and a loony but I thought that was an experience that really stuck out with me. "Because I'm Native I have to I know all about the animals and what kind of birds things are just by looking at them."...Then throughout elementary school when I started learning a lot about my culture...I still endured a lot of racism, like kids do, like um "you're brown because you're dirty" and things like that....Then that's when school started taking a really big turn with me. Like I [would] pretend I was sick and then I'd call home all the time, I'd want to go home. And in high school it was the same thing, I was more, I was really interested in my culture and I really had a strong worldview already by that point and the experiences that I went through in the classroom and at school I knew they weren't right and I knew I didn't agree with them um I knew what felt right to me I knew where I wanted to be I knew what I wanted to be doing and it just it didn't feel right to be there so I hardly ever went to my classes which was really bad...and to this day I think I'm

one credit short from, and it's a Grade 10 history credit that I'm short for, graduating high school. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

This experience offered by Sherry demonstrates the ways in which Aboriginal students deal with racism in the classroom such as calling home sick and skipping classes. For Sherry this eventually led to her leaving high school early which Sherry revealed during the Gathering that she still had not completed. Sherry, however, articulated a strong desire to pursue postsecondary education and was motivated by the possibility of having an access program to assist her with this transition back to school.

Further to Sherry's contribution, the following portions from Katherine's contribution in Wildfire Gathering 1 that was referenced in its entirety earlier, demonstrate the ways in which racism is experienced in university classrooms and the impact this has on Aboriginal students.

You walk into a classroom and you learn about Aboriginal people or Native people being conquered...the values of Aboriginal people...and how they spend their money, and the corruption in band offices and things like that....Once it is said that Aboriginal people are conquered then you start to feel as if you're conquered....When you are in your first year and they start to teach these things it makes you feel like "who am I? Do they even know who I am? Do they even respect who I am?" I know from things that I have gone through...where I sat in classes and just felt angry because of what was being taught, and I know from my own experience that the first couple of years I just sat there quiet and really [thought] "maybe I'm not visible, maybe I didn't wear my feathers today but how do they not see me? I'm a human being and I'm here"....I sat in those economics

class where it was [asked] “What are those Native people spending their money on? You know you go to the reserve and their houses are in shambles but what are they spending their money on?” I don’t know if they thought I was Spanish or what, but I am a human being and I’m sitting right here. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Katherine’s contribution mirrors what I wrote about in my own narrative about the classroom experiences that have left me feeling angry and ashamed. As Katherine points out, however, “You are there to learn.” University should be, as it is positioned in this thesis, an opportunity for Aboriginal women to learn. As the experiences noted in this section reveal, Aboriginal women are not only faced with accessibility barriers but also classroom racism that troubles their opportunity to learn.

### **Pursuing Postsecondary Education**

This theme explores the reality of pursuing postsecondary education for Aboriginal women. For some women, early school leaving presents challenges that hinder an Aboriginal women’s access into postsecondary education. For others, multiple barriers present significant challenges that make the task of furthering their education difficult. This theme explores those realities in the following subthemes: Walking Through the Door, Dropping Out, Motivating Forces, Future Educational Goals, and Why is Postsecondary Education Important?

#### **Walking Through the Door**

The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 mentioned a number of intersecting barriers that prevent them from taking those first steps towards “walking through the door.” These barriers included financial situations, education funding, housing, childcare, and “feeding their families.” For example, Sherry expressed:

I'd like to do something in education as well but right now it's just kind of in the far far distance I can barely see it because um it's so hard right now....I'm too worried about where I'm going to put my family, I'm too worried about housing (crying) and money and financial situations and food to worry about school ...but it is something that I would like to so eventually so that if there is a program that can make that easier for me than it would really be helpful. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Sharon discusses some of the ways in which a university program for Aboriginal women can respond to the multiple barriers that limit access. Sharon notes that it is up to the university to open the doors and allow Aboriginal women in:

To me access simply means opening the door and allowing the people in and that isn't going to succeed unless we do offer support. I've spoken with and being not Aboriginal but I do have a number of Aboriginal women friends and just about every single one of them has mentioned that they needed to develop the self-confidence and not just to challenge things that were going on in the classroom but just to walk into the door. So to offer the support to help young Aboriginal women develop the self-confidence to attend classes and to start challenging some of the wrongs that are out there in classrooms and to make the changes that need to be made here at Brock in order for them to be successful as students. I think this is going to go a long way to helping this program succeed.

Additionally, Katherine affirms the difficulty Aboriginal students have in "walking through those doors" to ask for help:

Even sometimes it's just walking through those doors and it can be very difficult

in our societies and our communities and it is very hard to ask for help and so going there and meeting someone there might be a lot harder than having them come to you. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The above comments affirm the importance of universities to understand and embrace Aboriginal women's realities and offer educational access and opportunities for success.

The following comments from Wildfire Gathering 1 attest to the strength and resiliency of Aboriginal women pursuing postsecondary education. Ilene conveys the strength and courage that it takes for an Aboriginal woman to "walk through the doors" of the university:

I just want to caution that...I have heard a reoccurring theme...about women and needing to survive and I think when a woman walks through the doors in the university that she should have a Ph.D. in survival. If she has gotten this far and is brave enough to even walk through the doors even as a visitor I just want to celebrate that the one thing that we excel at in our communities no matter what Nation you are from is that we are survivors.

The above comments present the challenge Aboriginal people have in simply "walking through the doors." For 3 of the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2, they have overcome this first challenge and, while they face numerous interconnected barriers along the way, their strength, resiliency, and determination shines through as they have come this far and persevered in their educational endeavours.

### **Dropping Out**

Faced with numerous multidimensional and intersecting barriers along with the lack of culturally responsive educational services, dropping out is a reality for many

Aboriginal women. The participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 shared their experiences of leaving school early.

Amanda relates being a single parent and the need for childcare as a barrier that led to her dropping out of university. She shared a story about when she brought her son to class with her because she was running late and could not sort out childcare arrangements. She described being upset when her professor called her out in front of the class because her son was viewed as being disruptive. She explained:

Dropping out was reality. Being sick having my son get sick being a single parent not having the supports not qualifying for daycare because I can't get part-time daycare because Niagara Region doesn't give you part-time they only give you full-time. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

For Amanda, the disconnect between class schedule, childcare regulations, and subsidies through the Niagara Region became a significant barrier contributing to her eventually dropping out of her program. Amanda, however, noted the desire to eventually return to complete her degree and was hopeful that an access program could assist her.

Janet shed light on some of the classroom experiences that lead to Aboriginal women dropping out or not continuing onto more advanced programs. Janet describes an experience she had shortly before the applications for teachers college were due:

This year prior to our applications being due I had an experience in one of my education classes where my prof had approached me in the lecture hall in front of everybody and told me to drop her class. So at that point I just, I was like "is this what I want to do with my life?" I was embarrassed and I was ashamed that someone like that is teaching and educating people and at that point I decided I'm



not going to do this and I did not apply. And now I don't know what I'm going to do. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

Janet discussed how this situation was the result of her bringing her 2-week old baby to class. It demonstrates the lack of understanding and acceptance of the priorities that come with Mothering and how this can, in turn, result in Aboriginal women “walking away” and seeking further support. As noted previously, this tendency to “walk away” also stems from the lack of advocacy and representation in the upper levels of administrative authority in the university.

While Sherry connects getting pregnant to not finishing high school, she is hopeful that she will have an opportunity to pursue postsecondary education in the future.

I'm one credit short from and it's a Grade 10 history credit that I'm short for graduating high school. I got pregnant when I was 19 so I haven't been back to finish that credit yet. I do want to eventually sometime go to postsecondary school. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

The women's contributions in Wildfire Gathering 2 affirm their views on the importance of pursuing postsecondary education despite the barriers that have led to them dropping out of school. Their narratives speak directly to the need for an access program that will respond to their experiences and ensure that dropping out does not become a reality.

### **Future Educational Goals**

Inspired by future educational goals, all of the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 demonstrated a desire to continue their education. As noted above, Sherry mentioned that she does eventually want to attend postsecondary. Amanda explained her need to take

some time off to care for children but stated “I’ll go back to school. I will go back in a year or two... I’ll go back. I’ll do it” (Wildfire Gathering 2). Kim stated her desire to do well in her undergrad and eventually go on to pursue graduate studies. Finally, Janet mentioned the desire to go on into a specialized Aboriginal specific program.

### **Motivating Forces**

While the women were not asked directly about the reasons why postsecondary education was appealing to them, all of the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 mentioned their families as a motivating force. Janet reveals that having her Daughter at an early age was a motivating force for her to “do something with her life.” She explained, “I eventually also dropped out [of high school] it wasn’t after I had my Daughter that I was like okay because I have her I need to do something with my life and I was also a single parent” (Wildfire Gathering 2).

Amanda talked about the desire to find employment as a motivating force for applying to postsecondary. “I said that’s it I’m not doing anything I’m sitting at home I can’t find employment I’m gonna go to school I’m not going to wait any longer so I got into school” (Wildfire Gathering 2).

Other participants mentioned the desire to bring knowledge back to the community as a motivating force. Katherine also reveals, in Wildfire Gathering 1, the tendency for women to engage in their studies for the betterment of their family and their community.

### **Why is Postsecondary Education Important?**

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Sharon suggested the need to educate potential students on why pursuing postsecondary education is important:

I think that a key piece of knowledge for this program is going to be why bother, you obviously have tons of barriers in your way of accessing higher education and I think that a key piece of knowledge is to share with women who may be eligible for the program is why bother with this as you are going to have a lot of barriers in your way and what is important about this? What is postsecondary going to get you that you don't have already? Perhaps sharing some statistics about being successful in the workforce and income and things like that and how it can be higher if you have an education, something like that might be helpful.

In Wildfire Gathering 2, a statistical information sheet about the realities of Aboriginal women in education was included in the participant packages. The women verified the importance of Sharon's above comment by noting the importance of Aboriginal women's programming in universities and demonstrating that the statistical information sheet inspired them.

### **Indigenous Ways of Being and Learning**

This theme discusses the Indigenous ways of being and learning that inform and are informed from an Indigenous worldview and related epistemic traditions. The incorporation of these ways of being into programming is integral to the success of Aboriginal women in education. This theme is divided into the following subthemes: Bringing Our Traditions into the Contemporary, Kinship, Children are the Gift, Cultural Difference and the Need for a Paradigm Shift, Honouring Our Knowledge, and Lifelong and Intergenerational Learning.

#### **Bringing our Traditions into the Contemporary**

In Wildfire Gathering 1, several of the participants noted the importance of

bringing traditional ways into the contemporary by applying cultural teachings to modern contexts. Katherine describes the importance of providing opportunity for students in which they:

can engage in different elements that speak to what they are learning about, whether it is law, whether it is social services, anthropology, whatever it is where they can specifically bring in their own education and teach the other students what they are learning....That is how our societies work and we all have a gift that we were given but we all brought that gift to each other so that was very, very, important and it still is....There can be teaching[s] taught and that is important, and that there are different social functions that bring us together because we are very celebratory in terms of a society. We like to celebrate each other and we like to learn from one another. So if women are given that opportunity to, not only explain the gifts that they have, but the things that they would like to learn that [can] open so many doors. For someone who might be in a sociology class and might be learning a different [aspect], their perspective might help someone that is in a law class or going through an economics class. Those things help to build one another and make each other stronger, and that is what we have done historically, and that is what we should be doing presently.

(Wildfire Gathering 1)

According to Katherine, we should reclaim these historical social structures, in which everyone has a role related to their gift that they can bring to the community to promote and take part in the well-being of the collective, and incorporate this into the education system. In this way, Aboriginal women will all be able to contribute and utilize what they

have learned to bring something unique to their fellow students. Part of this system is bringing their knowledge back to the community.

Darrel also suggests reclaiming our traditional systems will be beneficial to an education program:

We can look at our own economic system. The clan system was our own economic way of surviving back then, and we should bring that back again because we are going to be needing that in the future, and an economic system where, for instance I'm from the bear clan so the women that would come to the course and they would learn about the bear clan system [from] the people that are in the bear clan. And then you can have childcare for the bear clan people from that person that is taking the course, or from the deer clan person, or turtle clan person. And once they have learned their clan it is a form of helping each other and it is a form of survival. It is a form of economics. And for instance when I think, it was 2 years ago and we went to Whitehorse, me and my wife went there, and then when we got back home I tallied up how much money we spent. And we spent a whole bunch of money staying in hotels and eating in restaurants, and I told her look at how much we spent. And I told her that before 1400 this would have been free and she said "what do you mean by that" and I said "well if we went there before 1400 we would have told the bear clan people that we were coming and we would see that the bear clan people would feed us and it would be free and wouldn't cost anything." That is how you look after each other. So if you introduce that into curriculum, into a form of learning we can use that. Then you get into childcare after that and then you get into entrepreneurship where people

can start their own businesses in childcare and they get off that way. And so we can look at those kinds of activities within the program, but I really believe that the clan system could really help us if we learned how to use the clan system again in a good way. It will help us in the long run. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Not only does Darrel speak to the need of utilizing the Clan System in an education program for Aboriginal women, but he also maintains that we will need this system for future survival.

Delvin also outlines the need to bring our traditions into the contemporary. In the following, he indicates that there is a need to reclaim our “civilizations” by noting what youth are now lacking from the education system and how, as a result, they leave high school without the skills to deal with the real life challenges they then face:

I am...looking at...this whole area that we matriculate through our early years through our intellect, our IQ right, and we get grade point average, and whether it is 50% or 80% or whatever on that material that they present to us as teachers and they will pass you. And nowhere do we get any kind of understanding of our emotional intelligence, or social intelligence, or our artistic intelligence, because our artistic intelligence if the school board has no money that is the first thing to go. So somehow our education system needs to relook at all of this to give you that balance and we got to look at that, because a lot of our young people if you look at it, and I will be honest I am generalizing here, but they are just now starting their life and they may have dropped out of high school. And that is what we deal with at Niagara but they have no competencies to deal with rejection, apathy, sympathy because it has never been given to them in the school system,

right unless they had a strong family unit around them to give them those competencies. And they are noncognitive, the cognitive stuff is what the teacher presents to you every day or lectures to you....I think as human beings we really have to look at our whole sphere of emotional intelligence, and there is a whole new school from the nineties that has brought that on and everyone is starting to look at that school and the intelligence. I know for certain and when I look at my work there are, we have, First Peoples have an intellect. We are not from cartoons or movies. And that is what I think we need to bring forth on this because when we look at our intellect we try to address all of those intelligences and we have the psychology, the psychiatric intelligence to know that we need to have medicine societies. That has always been there, we now just have to start writing about it. I encourage all of you young scholars...to start writing from that perspective because...we had civilizations here in this province before contact, they had all of the hallmarks, they had all of those intelligences but somehow we [have] been told that they weren't working or they were witchcraft or something else. So in my language that is what we are exploring and looking at is those kinds of spheres, because we realize now in Ontario and they are still living civilizations on the First Nations side. The Muskego people in the north, the Anishinaabee in the middle of the province, and the Onkwehonweh around the lower great lakes, they all had hallmarks of civilizations and that is what we have to start talking about and encouraging our young people to start writing about and then maybe we can go somewhere. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

In the above passage he also attests to the suppression of our cultures that was viewed as

backward or uncivilized, and the need for our youth to uncover and reclaim those “hallmarks of civilization” that we understood and lived within for many years before contact. This is an important component of learning about and understanding culture.

### **Kinship**

Kinship was and still is today integral to the sustenance of traditional societies. It is through strong family units of support that women are able to find balance among their many responsibilities. Ilene described the need for students to have environments that are based on kinship and in this way offer “tangible supports” that honour all of the things that women carry with them into their educational journey:

I won't ever stop being a Daughter and I won't ever stop being a Mother and those are my priorities and they will always be my priorities so when I make other choices they have to embrace those priorities first so I need an environment to come to that can honour that and has kinship, has tangible supports. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 also demonstrated the need to balance their familial responsibilities and to have this incorporated into their education program. For example, Kim mentioned the desire to learn traditional ways to balance the need to care for her aging Mother with her responsibility to take care of her children.

My Mother is aging and so now I face the responsibility of trying to take care of her as well as my own children so [I would like to learn about] traditional ways of doing that or different support systems for that. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

The priorities associated with being a Daughter and a Mother, as both Ilene and Kim present, reveal that there are specific realities that Aboriginal women carry with them.



Their comments affirm the need for a kinship based environment that honours these priorities and offers tangible supports to assist the women in carrying out these responsibilities along with their studies.

### **Children are the Gift**

According to our traditional teachings, children are viewed as gifts from the Creator. They are not our possessions, rather they are beings that are sent to us “on loan” from the Creator and it is the responsibility for parents, families, and communities to nurture and guide the children so that they will be strong and well prepared to fulfill their duties as the future of the nation. Throughout Wildfire Gathering 1, this understanding of children was presented. Darrel (one of the Elders) illustrates the value of our children and speaks to the importance of this value and the need to nurture our youngest:

Earlier I mentioned knowledge and values and I often hear Elders say the value of having children in your arms shows that you love your child; the child can feel your heartbeat. I often see people carry their children in those car seats; just like luggage they kind of carry the kid around and put them on the floor and they'll have lunch and stuff like that. Well the child doesn't feel that hug anymore and that's a value that the Elders are talking about. So when you have guest speakers that come to the class they have all this knowledge and it might sound like very simple knowledge but it has a lifetime effect on it. So we have to listen to those Elders when they say those things. I think a lot of times we don't. We will listen but it will go out the other ear so when you do bring Elders into the classes you have to listen to them you have to encourage the women to listen to them when bringing up children. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Not only does this delicate reminder from our Elder remind us of the value that we must place on our children, but it also demonstrates the value of having Elders involved in the education system to offer our women these beautiful teachings.

Katherine also reminds us of cultural understandings that “children are the gift” as she outlines the need for women to have those tangible supports so that they are not overwhelmed with responsibilities:

It’s about building those networks of a partner in your classroom that says hey you have to do your breast feeding then I will take the notes for us and we will catch up later and we will meet and we will do this as a community and that is really what we are all here for and how to find ways to do things in a better way so that woman who is breast feeding doesn’t feel that I am going to miss my notes and now I am not going to pass his class because I missed his beautiful lectures and I had to feed my child and the child should never be the burden right, the child should be the addition, the beauty, the gift and other people have to recognize that too. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

She also points out the need for faculty and staff to understand the value of children so that the women are supported in their roles as Mothers.

In conjunction with what both Darrel and Katherine presented, Ilene also discussed the importance of Mother and child attachment and the need to “educate the educators” on the importance of this relationship:

And just the other is with relationships and coming back to what that looks like for a Mother and child and knowing...0 to 5 years the significant piece around attachment and the trajectory that you are creating or impacting neurological

development and the attachment affects everything so what sort of environment are we encouraging when that woman walks through that door with that young child and there are some very manageable ways of approaching that but you have to be thoughtful about it. Is it allowing her to visit with her child on campus, is it allowing her to nurse if she has a very young child and welcoming that not tolerating it, welcoming it, there is a big difference there and that is where the institution itself needs [to be] educated. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

In addition, Ilene points out that:

Not many women use cradleboards or moss bags [traditional to many Aboriginal peoples] yet our mainstream contemporaries can get up and lecture about attachment and not having attachment issues and I'm thinking that they should be listening to our Elders, they did this research a long time ago.

While Ilene makes note of recent studies associated with attachment and points out the fact that as Aboriginal peoples we have known about these very values of attachment, the women's contributions in Wildfire Gathering 2 indicate that the university is not yet tolerable of and accommodating to the needs of young women and their children. Ilene asserts that "It's all in your approach and your philosophy that you are supporting the whole family." The following subtheme attests to the need for a paradigm shift that allows for these approaches and philosophies of supporting women, children, and "the whole family."

### **Cultural Difference and the Need for a Paradigm Shift**

The participants in Wildfire Gathering 1 talked in-depth about the need for academic institutions to honour and embrace Indigenous ways of being, including

maternal and familial responsibilities. In correspondence with the above subtheme, *children are the gift*, Michelle talks about the need for universities to embrace the whole family and honour the children:

If you are trying to create an Indigenous environment or program and just like I was saying earlier about how culture isn't necessarily about the drums and moccasin making but...it's about being able to bring your children into an environment where they are actually welcome. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Michelle describes how her children have always been welcome in Aboriginal settings by referring to her experiences doing consulting work and community-based research in Indigenous communities. She points out that she brought along her children who were only babies at the time and her children were always welcomed and embraced. She never felt out of place and she notes this as a “big cultural difference” in comparison to mainstream settings:

I think if you are trying to create some kind of environment where we are really culturally based I think that is something again that we are talking about is those systems of kinship and caring and valuing children and honouring people who are doing that work and Mothering. That is a big cultural difference. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Valerie illustrates this cultural difference by describing her experience in a Native Teacher Education Program:

We have had many Moms bring their babies with them and nurse the baby right there and everyone would hold the baby, everybody changed the diaper you know so it wasn't always just Mom and it was a really good circumstance for everyone

and it changed the quality of our program, it really brought our students and staff together because we had a responsibility for our baby so it was a lot easier on the Mom as well so I would really encourage that. I don't know how the university feels about that and about a Mom bringing their baby in and nursing on the spot if necessary. It's a paradigm shift for a university. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

When asked how this changed the quality of the program, Valerie responded in this way:

The program became I think much more child centered and I think that one of the kinds of things that it did was that it brought us together as a group a little more because we all ended up being like the Aunties and we all ended up taking responsibility for that baby and still today when we see women that were in the program it's like oh how is so and so and sometimes they are like 6, 8, and 10 years old now but everybody wants to know about them so it really brought, I feel, a really important cultural aspect in there that children are a gift and we all as a community have a responsibility to raise up that child so it would be a real paradigm shift for any university. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Her description of this class illustrates the benefit of a family-centered and kinship-based environment. In her example not only did this make it easier and eliminate barriers for the Mother, it also offered all the students with a classroom environment based on cultural values where the community has a role in raising the children and assisting that Mother with her responsibility.

The following comments further attest to the significant cultural differences amongst Indigenous and Western ideas and values concerning education and the need for a "paradigm shift" to embrace and honour Aboriginal ways of being in universities. Carly

notes that:

Aboriginal peoples think and live in a circle and Eurocentric is linear you climb up the ladder till you are at the top, where you go from there is only down but they don't know that so for us it is the circle and its never-ending the circle goes on forever so it's a big difference in your mindset. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Similarly, Valerie conceptualizes the cultural difference in this way:

The nature of, I will say provincial education, and the underlying ideas about what they are doing permits and encourages people to understand a very vertical idea of who people are. It is very hierarchical; we [Aboriginal people] are not that. We are not hierarchical; we are very horizontal and so by the Western education models it teaches us to place ourselves in that vertical mosaic so to speak but we need our underlying and I think this needs to be very much included in any kind of program that goes on is the respect for all of the individuals and nobody is higher or lower than the others, everybody has a place, everybody is as important as the next and I think that is a real move away from Western ideas of teaching and learning. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

In Wildfire Gathering 2, Kim's comment about the pressures that come from grades reveals the difficulties that Aboriginal students face stemming from the hierarchical western education model. Kim noted "You need to get the best marks...to write the best papers...it's all based on grades" and she associated this pressure with high levels of stress. Thus, the negative impacts associated with the competitiveness of mainstream education are apparent in Kim's experience as opposed to the community-oriented approach of a more Aboriginal-centered model described by Valerie. Moreover, as noted

previously, several of the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 described the lack of support they experienced in situations where they had to bring their children with them to class. These participant experiences illustrate the significant cultural differences in comparison to Michelle's experiences where her children were embraced in Aboriginal settings, and, by extension, speak to the need for a "paradigm shift" to embrace Aboriginal women's realities in mainstream educational settings.

### **Honouring Our Knowledge**

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Katherine spoke about the importance of bringing traditional speakers into the education system to offset those barriers associated with irrelevant curriculum:

Another thing that I wanted to talk about because I think that is very important and it is a huge obstacle again for those women and another relationship that I wanted to discuss was looking ...at our Aboriginal historians, our storytellers, our Elders that can come in and can be teachers in the classroom so that they too are recognized for their equivalent knowledge to professionals in place. So somehow making it accessible for them to come in and still be recognized as professionals within that program or externally into different faculties.

Here Katherine attests to the importance for the university to honour that knowledge and recognize and value that expertise as equivalent knowledge to other lecturers and guest speakers. She points out that our Traditional Knowledge Keepers are not properly acknowledged for their expertise:

Well in terms of recognition when we were saying some of the very minimal honorariums that can be offered and they don't speak to a professional status

where you can have a PhD student come in or a PhD individual come in they can be offered 250 let's say and then you have your Aboriginal storyteller come in and they are offered \$50. The value of the knowledge and the information is up here but they are not equal to pay, they are not recognized the same because you know it is that piece of paper and some of our Elders have the most outstanding amounts of knowledge and they didn't have the opportunity to go to school and some of the things that they retained is because and not to mean any offense but because they didn't involve themselves in those [mainstream education] systems and they stood fast by their longhouses, they stood fast by their communities whether they are Onkwehonweh or Anishinaabe so some sort of system that recognizes them...that can add to your classes, that can add to your sessions and can really expand the knowledge of your students. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Katherine's contributions are important because she speaks to both the need for having Aboriginal Knowledge Keepers invited to bring their knowledge and their teachings into the classrooms so the students can benefit from this knowledge as a form of relevant curriculum. Her comments affirm the importance of valuing this knowledge as equivalent to mainstream professionals and guest lecturers.

### **Lifelong and Intergenerational Learning**

Learning, according to an Aboriginal worldview, is lifelong and intergenerational. Cultural differences associated with learning were discussed in Wildfire Gathering 1. Katherine notes that Aboriginal students:

are coming into a system that is outside our norms and normally we would go to our Grandmothers and normally we would go to our Grandfathers to learn about



the information about how our societies became successful, how our societies persevered, and how we preserved our culture and our language. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Katherine's description speaks to the intergenerational learning that is central to Aboriginal understandings of education where Grandparents hold a prominent role in childrearing.

The importance that the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 placed on intergenerational learning was evident when their vision of the program was discussed. Sherry revealed her desire to have traditional teachings made accessible to family members as well as the students. She also pointed out the desire to be able to bring younger siblings to classes so they can have exposure to the class within the university setting. Kim also pointed out the importance of having an environment where extended family members are welcome. Amanda expressed the desire to have family and community welcome in the classroom when Elders or traditional speakers are brought in. According to the participant's vision of an ideal education program for Aboriginal women, the participant's children, younger siblings, and other family members all become a part of the women's educational experience.

### **Knowledge**

This theme highlights the knowledge that the participants considered necessary to Aboriginal women's educational success. This theme is divided into the following subthemes: Culture, Language, Family Planning and Sexual Health, Academic Skills, Why Postsecondary Education is Important, and In Their Own Words - What the Women Want to Learn.

## Culture

When discussing the vision during Wildfire Gathering 1, Valerie pointed out the importance of having culture be a part of the vision. She cautioned that it must not be assumed that these students know their culture and that it is really important to “ensure that people have an opportunity to enhance their cultural understanding.” Michelle also noted the importance of having culture and language incorporated into the vision. She advises that “culture and language are clearly assets....You can also look at [the vision] without the culture and without the language and that is a barrier” (Wildfire Gathering 1). Michelle’s comment stresses the importance of having access to culture and language opportunities in university.

Likewise, the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 revealed their desire to have culture and traditional knowledge incorporated into their education. The women noted that traditional knowledge was very important to them and discussed the desire to have more access to cultural teachings.

The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 revealed varying degrees of cultural knowledge. In sharing their stories some of the women mentioned that they did not have a strong cultural upbringing:

I am Native but...I couldn’t tell you anything about myself I just know that I’m Native and I know the struggles that I’ve went through and I know what I’ve seen I know what I’ve experienced and I know what my Mom went through but I couldn’t give you any educational conversation about it. (Kim)

For those participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 who identified as having a strong cultural awareness, access to cultural teachings was equally as important to them as it

was for the other participants. This attests to the understanding that cultural and traditional teachings are part of the life-long learning that is characteristic of Aboriginal ways of being and learning. The women viewed an Aboriginal women's educational access program as an opportunity for them to strengthen their cultural understandings. Overall, the contributions from both of the Wildfire Gatherings reveal the value of having culture and language opportunities available to Aboriginal women.

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Michelle describes the Native Office or Aboriginal Student Services offered by many postsecondary institutions as being venues where students are able to learn about their culture. She recognizes that "some of the students that we see...are coming into understanding their culture, who they are for the first time." She maintains that the Aboriginal Student Services have:

really sustained a lot of our students and now we are trying to bring people in to show them there is a place for you here...and there is a place for you to discover yourself in whatever way it is that you need to go about that and whatever you are ready for.

Katherine reveals the need not only for students to have opportunity to engage in cultural activities, such as drum making, but also the need to learn all of the teaching behind those cultural activities:

It's not so much that I got to school and I made a drum and this is who I am, I am this drum and all of those teachings because there is so much more behind it, it is about those families and the strength of those families. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

## **Language**

The importance of language was apparent in both of the Wildfire Gatherings. In

Wildfire Gathering 2 everyone introduced themselves in their own traditional language; 2 of the participants introduced themselves with their Native names and explained the meaning of their names in English, while other participants began in their language in a way that demonstrated different levels of oral language skills. This shows that the participants are engaging in a process of learning their languages and that this reclamation of language is important to them and to their identity.

One of the 'Experts in their Lives' shared a story about how language was lost in her family:

Well my Grandfather had went to residential school and our family basically at that point said okay let's just pull away from our culture like my Grandmother my Grandfather the entire family basically. So we knew nothing we didn't indulge in it or learn our language or um well my Grandfather actually um he choose not to teach his children the ways because he was scared that they'd get taken away from them like he was from his parents and so he knew he knew the English but he never ever, ever, ever spoke cause he refused to speak the language that was not his but he also did not know his own language anymore well enough to speak it. So we always knew if he spoke we were in for it. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

This story demonstrates the rippling effect that residential schools had on Aboriginal languages. It also, however, speaks to the resistance those children had just as the women participants showed through their own reclamation of language.

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Katherine affirms the importance of our languages as they are related to cultural protocols and ceremony:

Language [is] one of the most important things about our cultures, because

without that we lose so much. We lose those songs, we lose those forms of dance, and we lose those ceremonies that should be taught and done in the language.

She asserts that when these cultural practices and ceremonies are done in English much of the meaning is lost that comes out of our traditional languages and advises that it is important to explain and correlate those teachings. Katherine's comment reveals the importance of learning and reclaiming those languages so that those teachings and all of the meanings are not lost. Correspondingly, Sharon points out that Brock currently offers Mohawk and Cayuga language classes and advises that such language courses be included in an access program for Aboriginal women.

### **Family Planning and Sexual Health**

During Wildfire Gathering 1, the "Experts in the Fields" discussed the importance of family planning and sexual health. Carly acknowledges that in her experience with working with Aboriginal students in high schools, the young women revealed that they want to learn about sexuality. She describes the importance of sharing knowledge about sexual health with our youth and advising them on making healthy choices. Likewise, Michelle notes participating in a provincial study that also revealed that youth want to have access to information about sexual health. She establishes the importance of giving the youth "options and opportunities for everything that is available to them and let's allow them to have the education and make their own decisions and let's support them in what they do" (Wildfire Gathering 1).

### **Academic Skills**

"They don't know that they don't know and that is a problem." (Valerie)

During Wildfire Gathering 1, some of the participants outlined the necessary academic skills integral to the women's success in university. Valerie indicates:

In terms of the title we have knowledge but I would like to add skills to that because I know that there are a lot of people who have some skill with the computer but when you go to university it is an absolutely critical skill that you be able to have full knowledge of the word processing and also Excel and all of that and I think that is absolutely critical. It is not just enough to be able to use it as a glorified typewriter. The other skill that I think is really important I think there is some introductory stuff to it but to be able to manage the library. A lot of people don't get that right away.

In response, Carly points out "they should be learning that in high school rather than learning that in their first year at university" and in response Valerie interjects with the following:

Well the fact of the matter is when you have a 50% dropout rate the people that you are dealing with are probably the 50% that have dropped out and there are big holes in their education in a lot of instances.

Throughout the discussion some of the other participants highlighted the importance of including writing skills, reading skills, critical reading skills, and numeracy skills into the program. Valerie also points out:

Something so very simple such as sentence structure, you know what is a sentence? I've seen lots of university papers where there are no verbs. I mean it sounds silly but it is very, very true and to be successful in university you need those skills.

Kelly also suggests that it is “important to understand the language of the university early on.” She describes the “language of the university” as comprising information about the different disciplines, the credits, degree categories, such as undergraduate and graduate, and so on. While Michelle makes note that most universities have resources to assist students in developing those skills, she suggests that they are not always utilized. In response, Valerie reveals that “they don’t know that they don’t know and that is a problem.” Finally, Katherine suggests that perhaps bringing the resources to the students may make them more accessible for Aboriginal students.

### **Why is Postsecondary Education Important?**

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Sharon discussed the importance of offering Aboriginal students the knowledge about why postsecondary education is important. She acknowledges the barriers that exist for Aboriginal women in accessing higher education and feels that “a key piece of knowledge” to share with the women is “why bother?” She notes the importance of sharing with the women what a postsecondary education will get them that they do not already have. More specifically, she suggests that sharing information about income and employment levels and about being successful in the workforce may be helpful to encouraging Aboriginal women to pursue postsecondary education.

### **In Their Own Words - What the Women Want to Learn**

The participants from Wildfire Gathering 2 shared what types of knowledge they would like to have incorporated into the program. Their responses revealed that they wanted to learn about Aboriginal history, traditional teachings, women’s stories, parenting, spirituality, women’s health issues, fitness and nutrition, and family values.

When asked what types of traditional knowledge the women would like to see incorporated into the program, the women responded in this way:

Kim: Women health issues, um spirituality, parenthood.

Sherry: Walking in two worlds kind of thing, balance.

Kim: Yeah women's stories you know just stories.

Kim: Family values, and to be more specific on that one I just know that my Mother is aging and so now I face the responsibility of trying to take care of her as well as my own children so traditional ways of doing that or different support systems for that.

Kim: how bout history

Beyond the above suggestions, the women expressed a desire to learn from an Aboriginal perspective and to have exposure to cultural teachers such as Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers. A couple of the participants affirmed the importance of having exposure to traditional teachings such as men's roles so that they can teach these to their sons.

### **Critical Elements for Access and Success**

The participants in both Wildfire Gatherings revealed an array of critical elements for access and success that I have outlined in the following subthemes: Funding, Housing, Childcare, Transportation, Student Voice in Student Services, Support Systems, and Space and Accessibility. While these subthemes are discussed individually, it was clear throughout Wildfire Gathering 2 that the participants access to and success within university was and is dependent on an intersection of these fragmented services. For example, Sherry indicated, "I'm too worried about where I'm going to put my family,



I'm too worried about housing, and money, and financial situations, and food to worry about school" (Wildfire Gathering 2).

### **Funding**

The participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 described funding as a significant element to pursuing postsecondary education. Kim pointed out that accessing funding was a motivating force in her decision to attend college. Another participant noted that she missed her funding deadline and while this was an obstacle for her she decided to apply for OSAP for funding. Janet noted her frustration with the lack of funding for Aboriginal students through scholarships and bursaries:

Like I have applied for bursaries and everything possible that is there that is supposed to be available for Aboriginal students and I have been denied every year saying I don't qualify. I have not gotten a penny out of this school.

During the 2009/2010 academic year, there was a new bursary offered for both Aboriginal undergraduate and graduate students. This bursary was provided by the province of Ontario and offered an undefined amount of awards. The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 discussed the awareness of this award in this way:

Amanda: But how come nobody knew about it?

Janet: But they wouldn't let me apply for it.

Sherry: Why?

Janet: Because I had already filled out the general bursary application form, which means they wouldn't allow me to apply for a second one. They would just dismiss it, which means that I couldn't even apply for it.

Kim: The only way I knew about it was through seminar and someone else was

applying for it and if you applied you got it but I wasn't specifically told about it. It was evident that the women were frustrated with the method of information sharing about this bursary. Moreover, the discussion demonstrated the women's desire to have access to alternate sources of funding to supplement their postsecondary education allowances.

The participants in Wildfire Gathering 1 also discussed the issue of funding at length and some of the implications associated with funding relevant to the access program. Ilene perceived the gap between status and non-status funding sources to be a barrier that must be considered:

I think we also need to consider that there is going to be a significant amount of students that may not have their status and they are going to have to go through many, many different avenues of funding as well and to not put that as barriers because then we are putting up barriers between Nations.

The specifics about postsecondary education funding for Aboriginal students were also examined. One of the participants mentioned that the amount of education allowance does not include childcare. This raises another barrier for students with children who will have to find other supports to assist them financially. There are also regulations associated with the funding for First Nations students including full-time status as defined by the band (which does not always match with the university requirements).

### **Housing**

A couple of the participants experienced frustration with housing. For Sherry, housing was a significant concern. The issue of housing was also discussed with respect to program location and the needs of women coming from further distances. In Wildfire

Gathering 1 Janice suggested the need for housing partnerships and perhaps involving the university residence in receiving women and their families. Similarly, in Wildfire Gathering 2 Amanda suggested establishing partnerships with Niagara Regional Housing to assist Aboriginal women in university with access to housing opportunities.

### **Childcare**

As all of the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 are Mothers of young children, it is not surprising that childcare was discussed at length. The participants talked about the desire to have onsite childcare and they mentioned the possibility for an Aboriginal Head Start program or similar model of care where culture would be a strong component of the childcare program. The women also talked passionately about having the support from each other and sharing the responsibility of caring for their children. Kim brought up the idea of having a space for children and their families or something like an on-site early years centre. Kim imagined this to be a space where women, children, and families could come together and have a place to share knowledge. Building from Kim's vision, Amanda perceived this to be a space where the women could take turns caring for the children and share responsibilities. This conversation made it clear that on-site, culturally appropriate childcare that welcomed and embraced the women's participation and involvement in care was important to the participants.

**Childcare subsidies.** Childcare subsidies were also discussed in both Wildfire Gatherings. In Wildfire Gathering 1, I mentioned my own childcare concerns with respect to the tensions I personally have experienced with the disconnect between childcare centers, childcare subsidies, and the university:

How are we going to teach the women to negotiate the steps that they are going to

have to take for childcare because I know for myself my oldest son is 6 and he has been in childcare since he was 5 months old and now I have my youngest who is going to be 2 so I have been dealing with and they are both on subsidized childcare so I have had to put them on waitlist at the daycare and as well as the region but being a student there is a lot of barriers that I have come across with childcare. One being my class schedule because I have to go and meet with my subsidy worker and provide them with my schedule and explain the need of why I need study time because sometimes courses are offered at night and sometimes courses are offered on the weekend. Right now I am doing my thesis so I am not in any courses and that also requires lengthy detailed letters from professors explaining why I need childcare and what my workload is like and so sometimes approaching a professor to ask those kinds of things puts you in a very vulnerable position because first of all you have to tell them your whole life story, you know you're a single Mother, you're on subsidized childcare it is very intrusive and it's kind of giving your professors a lot of information about your personal life that other students don't have to so these are things that then women going into the access program will have to come across and I have also had a childcare worker question me why I was bringing my son to daycare when he was supposed to be home for the holidays last year and I was still working on my final papers but she thought I was a high school student and said that I should be finished my exams and that I should be home with my children so it's those types of comments that for some of us women we walk away.

The participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 noted similar experiences with the

disconnect between subsidy requirements and university requirements in accessing childcare:

Amanda: Dropping out was reality um being sick having my son get sick being a single parent not having the supports not qualifying for daycare because I can't get part-time daycare because Niagara Region doesn't give you part-time they only give you fulltime.

Janet: I had a really hard time getting childcare as well so I could go back to school this year they said they weren't going to give me childcare unless I took my Daughter out of the daycare she was in and put her into a different daycare somewhere else where she didn't know anybody and because it was a full-time program they didn't want to fund it because I had evening classes and they didn't think they should have to pay for daytime courses to have her in daycare for 9-5 um so there was issues with that as well.

In Wildfire Gathering 1, Ilene also affirms the childcare barrier associated with day and evening care and related formal and informal childcare arrangements:

One of the pressures within any formal childcare arrangements is they don't generally cover the informal so those evenings, those weekends, and study times and those are critical but also when the children get sick. Children do get sick and I hate to say it but as an operator when they are in childcare they get sick more so that has to be looked at.

Marsha contributes to the concern of childcare feasibility by acknowledging that this is a concern that needs to be addressed:

I was actually just wanting to extend on...the access to flexible care, part time,

evening care here at Brock and that it is a part of a great overall need and that is certainly I get a lot of phone calls, a lot of requests, a lot of students looking for that kind of care and unfortunately it does not exist here at Brock but the need is certainly out there but I think the need...is something that is affecting the population at large and definitely needs addressing and it is definitely something that people need to be aware of and that these ladies will have to be aware of because you don't, and this is what I find with a lot of our students, is that they don't always know what their class schedule is going to look like and they could end up with a lot of daytime classes and then maybe a little heavier in the evening classes in another semester and it becomes really problematic as far as childcare and how they are going to make that happen and what is out there and what is available to support them with that is an issue and it doesn't exist here.

In Wildfire Gathering 2, Ilene also pointed out that there are a number of students who reside on their reserve community and, as a result, do not qualify for subsidies even if they have left their community to go to school. She maintains that this situation creates another barrier for students who will then have to find ways to cover full childcare expenses as well as their education expenses.

**Educating childcare providers.** The issue of educating childcare providers on the unique needs of Aboriginal women was also brought up throughout Wildfire Gathering 1. Ilene discussed the need for childcare providers to be more holistic and open to embracing the whole family. She points out that "It's all in your approach and your philosophy that you are supporting the whole family. She is not a client" (Wildfire Gathering 1). Marsha perceived this as a huge opportunity to build relationships between

the access program and the Brock childcare centre in support of Aboriginal women and their relationship with the daycare:

As far as the childcare centre here at Brock is concerned...I think this issue of relationship is huge because I think that we need more ongoing relationships and I think that there is a huge opportunity here for relationships, not only for information sharing but for understanding and having a really good open communication for Aboriginal women as they are coming into the programs to know what is available to them as far as childcare is concerned because that is a huge issue as far as being able to manage your studies and to know that you have your child in a place that you feel comfortable and secure and that you have a good relationship with so as well as working together towards teaching and educating our staff about how they can better improve their relationships with the women coming into the programs and I think there is always room for learning and connections and I think the relationships for us we are constantly trying to build on them at Brock and I think that there is a huge opportunity here and I think that will be a very important part of what you are trying to accomplish.

(Wildfire Gathering 1)

Marsha's contribution in Wildfire Gathering 1 identifies an opportunity for educating childcare providers on the realities of Aboriginal women and to open up dialogue between Aboriginal women and the Brock childcare centre to ensure the women feel comfortable and secure leaving their children in care while they engage in their studies.

### **Transportation**

The topic of transportation was raised during both Wildfire Gathering 1 and 2.

Transportation was mentioned in Wildfire Gathering 1 in discussing program location. Janice suggested that it may be beneficial for students who are living on the Six Nations reserve, for example, to offer a portion of the program within their community.

In Wildfire Gathering 2, transportation was also raised when the topic of programming at local Native Centres was discussed. Amanda mentioned that she believed some of the programming and resources were not being accessed by those who were eligible. Carly commented with the following, “but they might not be able to get there...they don’t have the money maybe.” The participants talked about the location of the local friendship centre in Niagara-on-the-Lake being inconvenient because transportation can be difficult in that it is not located on a bus route. A couple of participants also noted frustration with parking at Brock. Janet noted that it is very expensive and sometimes the parking lot is full.

### **Student Voice in Student Services**

In Wildfire Gathering 2, Kim noted that she felt that a lot of students were not receptive to services, such as writing skills workshops, if they were pushed on them and she noted the importance of asking the students what kind of services they want. She suggested that the services offered through an access program for Aboriginal women should be geared towards those students in a given cohort. Kim perceived the lack of students participating in certain programs resulting from the lack of student voice in student services:

Well once again I don’t think they asked the students what they wanted and a lot of the times that’s what’s going on nobody’s asking the students what we want...if you didn’t have us, there wouldn’t be any services.



Kim also noted that consulting with the students about how to service them should happen on an ongoing basis as student needs will change. Empowering the students to become involved in deciding what services are available to them will increase both the relevancy and the accessibility of those services.

The participants also noted the desire for culturally relevant services. Kim and Sherry acknowledged the need for culturally appropriate counselling services. Kim also noted the need for gender appropriate services to assist with Aboriginal women's issues. Amanda suggested having a "cultural spin" added to some of the existing workshops and services offered through the library. Moreover, Kim suggested providing these workshops on an ongoing basis:

Instead of doing a one-time workshop doing an ongoing series of workshops where it's a set amount of dates that you meet together and somehow get a certificate in the end of it or something, as opposed to just one-time workshops. So you start you know at the beginning of the year and you just kind of work through.

Overall, the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 identify a service gap in the existing workshops and services offered. Their contributions reveal the importance of ensuring student voice in student services, the need for culturally relevant and gender appropriate services for Aboriginal women, and encourage ongoing consultation with students to determine what their needs are.

### **Support Systems**

The final subtheme in this section is tremendously important to the success of Aboriginal women in education. As the previous sections in this chapter have revealed,

Aboriginal women face a significant number of barriers in accessing and participating in postsecondary education. Support systems are, therefore, of critical importance to Aboriginal women in education. It must be noted that support systems are a very delicate topic. This is because, while it is very much a necessity, it can also be looked at as a barrier when significant support systems are missing. Further to this, the following discussion on support systems also affirms the importance of Elder support by illustrating how this occurred in Wildfire Gathering 2. Finally, it also reveals how Wildfire Gathering 2 became very much a circle of support for the participants.

**Community.** The participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 revealed that community support had been beneficial to their own move towards strengthening their cultural identities and encouraging this in their children as well. The participants also noted the importance of having a relationship with the community and bringing “community into the academic setting.”

**Friends.** In Wildfire Gathering 2, Kim noted the support of a friend who had encouraged her to challenge the negative situation that arose when she was centered out in class by her teacher. With the support of her friend, Kim did, in fact, confront her teacher to express her feelings about the situation and Kim was then able to move in a positive direction.

**Mentorship.** The topic of mentorship arose during Wildfire Gathering 1. It was discussed in this way:

Valerie: There are a lot of young people who have really good value systems as well and who are culturally knowledgeable about that and sometimes young people hear the message from young people better so I think you should also

strongly consider that in addition to Elders.

Janice: Like role models really.

Valerie: Role models you know a lot of kids will say hey that person got a master's degree, look at them, I can do that.

**Elder support.** This portion presents the way in which the Elder in Wildfire Gathering 2 became a powerful support source for the participants. The Elder was incredibly supportive to the women in the group. While the Elder offered support in a gentle manner and demonstrated care and concern, she was also very firm and she did not sugarcoat realities for the women. As a woman who had herself gone through university as a single Mother, the Elder was able to relate to the women's experiences in a nonjudgmental fashion while offering sound advice for the women to carry with them on their journeys.

Upon sharing their educational stories during Wildfire Gathering 2, the women revisited painful and difficult experiences and, as such, the women became quite emotional. The impact the women's experiences had on them was apparent in both the tears and the laughter that was expressed in the Gathering. When the women became emotional, the Elder was there to offer encouraging words to the women, reminding them of their ability to persevere and offering them a positive and inspiring way of looking at their realities:

But those are all things that come in our way...if you have faith in yourself it will resolve itself. Sometimes what seems to be an obstacle is really just something that, if you look at it in a good way in a good light, it will clear....Through struggle comes clarity. So I know right now those words, you probably say "oh

yes well that's okay" but believe me because I went through that struggle to....

You just have to keep your wits together and know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and it's not a train. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

The Elder also acknowledged the women for their efforts to make positive choices for themselves and their children: "I think it's wonderful that you all want your education and bringing in new little Aboriginal [children] and they're going to be raised in that culture and in the two worlds and they will be much better people." She also encouraged the women of the importance of being strong and grounded within their cultural identity in the following ways:

I think so I think you have to be solid and easy and feel good about your own identity before you can pass anything out to anybody else you know but if your if you feel if you know who you are and you accept yourself you're sailing you know cause nothing can possibly take that away from you or make you feel that you're inferior cause you're safe within yourself but that comes with years as well you know but you girls are all pretty well at the point where you're really women you're not really girls anymore and you know and you have to step up to the plate take your lumps but carry on. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

The more you know, the more you understand where you are at in life the stronger you are and the more you can do for yourself and your children. It took me 7 years to get my B.A. but I stuck to and got it and it was part time and there were many times when I thought what am I doing, what am I doing this for and suddenly a little voice said for you for yourself cause you're going to feel good about it and say I did it but oh raising 5 kids and you know the knowing who you

are and knowing how your ancestors and your Grandmothers you know are behind you. When you're in tune with your culture your ancestors are really right there and if you just kind of think about them and they do help they do give you that energy or feeling that "it's okay I'm going to make it" cause they made it in their way and look at how hard it was for them. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

The support that took place within the Gathering illustrates not only the importance but also the value of incorporating Elders into the education system. The next section further attests to the value of the Elder involvement by demonstrating how her contributions inspired the women to also support one another.

**Circles of support.** Through the guidance of the Elder, the women in Wildfire Gathering 2 began to build off her encouragement and engaged in supporting one another. In this way, the Gathering became very much a support circle allowing not only for the sharing of these stories but for healing and encouragement to take place. The following exchange from the gathering serves as an example of how the women engaged in supporting one another along with the Elder:

Carly: So you know and we're still here right opportunity comes you know.

Amanda: Blessing in disguise. You'll do something great for the kids and you'll know it and YOU will have done something great for the kids.

During Wildfire Gathering 1, Katherine suggested that it was important for women to have circles of support:

where women can come and sit in these circles and discuss what's happening in the classrooms, and how to deal with these things more effectively, so they know they are not alone and that there is a network of women.

In a way, this was very much what took place during Wildfire Gathering 2 as the above exchange revealed. Katherine envisioned these “circles of support” as a space that can assist women develop their “voices” so that they can draw strength from each other’s experiences and feel more empowered to speak up for themselves:

And letting them know that yes when you walk into that classroom yes we need to have that voice and sometimes that strength has to come from circles like this so that maybe these women can come and they can sit in these circles and they can discuss what’s happening in their classrooms and how to deal with these things more effectively so they are not alone in that classroom. Perhaps they were during that one session but when they go back to that class they have a network of other women that have gone through similar things and they can bring those experiences forward. They can ask them to come and sit with them in those classes and I know that I was fortunate enough that I had my family afterwards but I know that is a huge barrier as well, women with children, where do they fit in and somehow we need to create that balance again of who they are as Native women and Native Mothers and trying to bring that into the classroom.

Katherine elaborated further on this vision:

So if you are going to have to step out of class maybe it is those peer groups that you are going to set up where someone else says hey I will take the notes for us and you go do your thing because as women we can’t continue to just burden ourselves and take on all this responsibility. I had to get the notes, I had to breastfeed and I had to write while I was breastfeeding and that is just too huge for any woman to take on so yes our roles are changing but it doesn’t mean that

we have to bombard ourselves with more and more responsibilities....It's about building those networks of a partner in your classroom that says hey you have to do your breastfeeding then I will take the notes for us and we will catch up later and we will meet and we will do this as a community and that is really what we are all here for and how to find ways to do things in a better way so that woman who is breastfeeding doesn't feel that I am going to miss my notes and now I am not going to pass his class because I missed his beautiful lectures and I had to feed my child and the child should never be the burden right, the child should be the addition, the beauty, the gift and other people have to recognize that too.

In this way Katherine attests to the strength that comes from supporting one another and working together as a community to overcome the barriers associated with juggling the many responsibilities that Aboriginal women carry with them into the classroom. The importance of Katherine's vision of a circle of support was validated in Wildfire Gathering 2 where Sherry suggested creating "A community of Mothers" and outlined "the support that you would get" from other Mothers who are also students. She described the need for a space where "Mothers who are students going to the university to get together and do something. I think those relationships are important to be there."

Likewise, Amanda pointed out the need for the women who are Mothers to be able to have that time away from their children to get together as a support group. She pointed out being happy with the opportunity to have done that during the Gathering over the lunch break noting "I think that's important." Amanda envisioned a program that includes this type of support group where some of the women could take turns providing childcare while the other women could meet. The women would then alternate childcare

duties allowing all of the women an opportunity to engage in a support circle.

Further, Kim suggested that Aboriginal women who do not have children could also play a strong role in supporting those other women with children. She added “it just further strengthens those relationships within the community like within the school community.” Michelle’s description in Wildfire Gathering 1 presents how the relationships with other women that Kim suggested above really can assist those Mothers by embracing the children and ensuring a welcoming space for them as well:

One of the things that I admire about the people who run our Aboriginal student centre is they are very child friendly so when people come in with their kids, they welcome the kids and the kids have a place there and it is not just a place for the students but it is a place for the kids and they have toys and things for them to do. We have one single Mother with four kids and sometimes well she has to bring some of the kids and people will help her and they will look after them while she goes to class for an hour and a half or whatever, she knows that she can ask that. She doesn’t depend on that but she knows that at least the coordinator in the centre will help her out if she gets stuck or whatever so when you have the cultural stuff built into your program make stuff so that the kids feel that is their place too. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

Additionally, Valerie describes a class scenario that embraces women and their children:

[What] we did is we put together a bunch of toys, people brought in toys and stuff so we always had a box of toys for the kids to play with and we found a place for the kids to nap when they needed to so it’s really it’s going back again to the



community being responsible for the child and that we need to encourage and support that so that Moms feel like they are not a burden on anybody and that they feel like everybody cares about what they are doing.

**Family and partner support.** The participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 acknowledged the need of partner support. Janet spoke of the difficulty she felt she would face as a result of the lack of partner support with her partner recently leaving. This placed significant financial and childcare pressures on her that she was not accustomed to. Kim suggested orienting significant others to the program so that they can understand what it entails and educating them on their need to be supportive and offering them suggestions for ways of being supportive.

Correspondingly, in Wildfire Gathering 1 Valerie also noted the importance of family and partner support:

I think one of the really important things about a Mother going to school is the education part that has to happen is that the family needs to be fully aware of what it takes to go to school and when I talk about the family, I talk about the children, I am talking about the partner if there is one, the grandma, the Aunties, the Uncles and I know when I went to school and I went to school a long time, everyone was involved and I think that that becomes really important in terms of relationships... I think that is a big commitment for the whole family. How do we get that information out there?

**Families of the heart.** One of the concerns that I raised during Wildfire Gathering 1 was about being aware of those students who do not have their family's support and, in some cases, are completely on their own. I felt that it was important to

raise this concern, because while our cultures value kinship and family centeredness, some Aboriginal peoples do not have those strong family units as a result of colonial impact on our families. For this reason, I can see, and in my own experience I have felt, that acknowledgements of family support can also be a barrier for those who do not have those strong family units if their realities are not included and alternative support systems are not available to them. I raised my concern in this way:

I think that for relationships and I think that it has come up a few times and the need to talk about the whole family and the Aunties and the role of the grannies and I know you guys even talked about kinship and the family but I think that we also need to remember some of those young women who don't have that and it is just the young women and their children and they don't have any sort of emotional support at home so I think as part of this program we also need to have, and we also talked about the community in the urban setting, and we really need to have that community in this program because I think it is important for all of the women that they have the support and that their accomplishments be recognized because they might not go home and have anybody to pat them on the back and support them so I just thought that we can't forget about those women as well.

In response, Michelle stated that this is where "families of the heart" become really important. She described "families of the heart" as being a support to:

Welcome back those people who have been dispossessed...and don't have the courage to go back to that particular family or community but can start by going into the community that we created, which you know it is multinational because

we cover different ones and sort of allowed her to creep back towards where it is that she belongs. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The participants in Wildfire Gathering 1 also noted the importance of having an “Aunty program” and creating a family for those individuals who need that support system.

### **Space and Accessibility**

Michelle notes the importance of having a physical space on campus where those “families of the heart” mentioned above can take place:

I think that is really important and...that it makes an enormous difference if you have a space that is a comfortable environment for them to come and sit between classes or meet with each other and do computer work and print. We have printing and we have all of those kinds of things in our space not to mention food. Like food is really important but if you don't have a space where you can gather and have a feast on a regular basis. We have soup and bannock Wednesdays and every Wednesday we have our Ojibwa teacher, our Uncle come in and he sits around and tells stories. So you need to have that kind of space to be able to create those families of the heart that I was talking about. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 echoed Michelle's suggestion about space indicating that the current Aboriginal student space was lacking. Kim noted that the lack of space offered by the university for Aboriginal students is an embarrassment and that it allows for her to feel devalued by the university as an Aboriginal student. Janet outlined her frustration with not having a physical space on campus where she could sit and feed her infant. Janet also noted frustration with not having a space to change her son “there's no room to change him, there's no change tables in the school anywhere, no bathrooms

where you can take a baby into.” The lack of these resources makes the university inaccessible for women with young children.

### **Further Considerations**

This section acknowledges two important issues that were raised during the Wildfire Gatherings: access for older women and the role of Aboriginal men in the program. While the focus of this project has been on looking at the barriers Aboriginal women face in education with a specific focus on young Mothers and responding through the development of an access program for young women and their families, it is important to discuss the proceeding points as areas for further consideration.

#### **Access for Older Women**

During Wildfire Gathering 1, Darrel outlined the importance of including those women who have stayed home and raised their children and are now looking to get back into the workforce. He asks:

What happens to them after looking after the family and they want to get back into education, they want to get back into the workforce and what would they do kind of thing? And my wife was fortunate enough that she did find a job after 20 years of her work because Mothering is a lifetime work and a fulltime job so she did that and we have to kind of think about those women because we have to, if we really want to get back to our culture then we have to think about that as well. I might get some people hurt here or angry but that is part of our culture. Part of our culture is our wives and Mothers stayed home while the Dad went into the bush and hunted the moose and all that, so it kind of continues in that sense but today we have to men and women have to work to survive I can see that in a

cultural way and culture means that culture changes the values never change but the culture does change from the times that we are in and it has changed today where men and women have to work together to pay for the mortgage and to pay for the cars and all that kind of stuff but if the women wants to stay home with the children what happens to that person when they want to get back into the workforce? (Wildfire Gathering 1)

While the area of access for older Aboriginal women who have adult children is not my area of immediate focus for this project, I think it is an important area for further consideration. As Aboriginal education is positioned in a lifelong learning framework, access for older and younger woman alike is honourable to creating a program that is truly culturally based. Moreover, inviting older women along with younger women as part of an Aboriginal women's university program may allow the older women to bring their knowledge and life lessons to the younger women, allowing the older women to serve as Aunties and demonstrating the lifelong and intergenerational learning that is consistent with an Aboriginal worldview.

### **The Role of Aboriginal Men**

During Wildfire Gathering 1, Ilene asked, "where do our men have a place in this?" Parallel to Ilene's concern, Janet also raised this challenge in Wildfire Gathering 2:

I know this is about the women but what about the guys? Do they just get lost in all of this? Because we're moving forward with our female Aboriginal students but what happens with them? Are they just kind of left out of all of this?

Sherry responded with the following:

Yea what about men who have to look after their children...I know you don't hear

of it too often but I don't know of anyone around here but the men with their children who are trying to go to school. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

While Sherry acknowledged that single men raising their children and trying to get their education at the same time is not a commonality, she perceived there to be limited services for these men because many of the services are geared towards single Mothers.

Overall, the general consensus among the participants in Wildfire Gathering 2 was that Aboriginal women really do need this service. While the stories they shared within the Gathering attest to this need, Sherry also noted the “statistics show it.” The women demonstrated, however, that they were supportive of the idea of having men who are raising their children be welcome in such an access program.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter presented a consensus based vision from Wildfire Gathering 1 with the “Experts in the Fields” and Wildfire Gathering 2 with the “Experts in their Lives.” This vision has been presented within seven overarching themes: Balance, Identity, Classroom Experiences and Implications, Pursuing Postsecondary Education, Indigenous Ways of Being and Learning, Knowledge, and Critical Elements of Access and Success. I have presented the findings in a way that honours the voices of the participants. At times, I have offered lengthy quotations to present the full context of participant contributions enabling deeper insights into their multilayered experiences. Ultimately, this allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants’ vision of access to and success within university. The following chapter extends this vision through a discussion and recommendations in which I position the reclamation of language and culture along with responsive programming as integral to the educational successes of Aboriginal women.

## **CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While there is a plethora of statistical information concerning Aboriginal women in Canada, the literature on Aboriginal women “suffers from a certain lopsidedness” (Stout & Kipling, 1998) with more focus on areas such as Aboriginal women’s health and Aboriginal women in prison, and less focus on Aboriginal women in education. This may be attributed to the low numbers of Aboriginal women in education along with the higher susceptibility of health problems and overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in the criminal justice system. As I outline in this thesis, however, the narratives of Aboriginal women across Canada, whether they are in prison or in higher education, are strikingly similar. This thesis contributes to the limited research that focuses on the experiences of Aboriginal women in education by focusing on the barriers in access to and within university.

A 1996 statistical profile of Aboriginal single Mothers in Canada established that there is a tendency for Aboriginal single Mothers to continue their education that goes well beyond their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Hull, 2001). It concludes that this suggests that being Aboriginal and a single Mother is not a barrier to education. This oversimplified suggestion, however, fails to look deeper into the statistical profile to reveal the experiences of those women. Patricia Monture-Angus (2007) articulates that:

When the analysis of race and gender is shifted beyond a demographic analysis to a place that gives space for the experience and meaning of socially and economically vulnerable groups, a more vibrant and reflective sociology emerges. This can be demonstrated through an examination of the life experiences, biographies and narratives of Aboriginal women. (p. 208)

This study “gives space for the experience and meaning” of the educational narratives of Aboriginal women and demonstrates through their narratives, along with my own, that Aboriginal women, many of whom are young Mothers, face numerous barriers associated with access to and success within postsecondary education. There is an immediate and striking need for university access programs that respond to these barriers and honour the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of these women and their families. The fact that the tendency of Aboriginal single Mothers to pursue university is strikingly different from the statistical pattern of non-Aboriginal single Mothers only attests to the resilience, strength, and determination of these women.

A discussion on developing a university access program that responds to the needs of Aboriginal women and their families goes well beyond the mere notion of access. For Aboriginal women, access to postsecondary education continues long after those women “walk through the door.” Such a program must respond holistically and intensively to the needs of Aboriginal women and families for its entirety. Access must seamlessly emerge into retention and from that transcend into the world of increased opportunity and success for Aboriginal women, families, and communities.

The barriers Aboriginal women face in access to and within postsecondary education are layered, interconnected, and complex. As such, solutions responding to those barriers must also be layered, interconnected, and complex. Many of the barriers stem from intersecting oppressions, disadvantages, and misunderstandings. Those systems must become untangled so that an appropriate response can be braided together creating a strong, intricate, and culturally aligned foundation. I have attempted to untangle the many interconnected barriers in the previous chapter. In this chapter I begin



to braid together those sections by introducing culture, language, and responsive programming offering solutions for not only access but also for success. As culture and language are so intricately interconnected, responsive programming must incorporate these dimensions so that the braid is strong and flowing as one.

This chapter begins by offering a discussion of the educational experiences of women that may be defined as racism. More specifically, I clarify my use of the term racism by challenging attitudes that are entrenched in dominant discriminatory thought that stems from influences from beyond the university milieu. Next, I offer a discussion of language and culture and position them in relation to the development of strong identities. I then offer a section on implications for practice by demonstrating the need for responsive programming and offering recommendations for the development of an access program to meet the needs of Aboriginal women and their families.

### **Racism**

In the previous chapter I stated that I would revisit my choice in using the term racism. This is important because, as I have noted previously, many non-Aboriginal teachers are influenced by a series of ideological constructs that are ingrained in the Eurocentric mindset and that influence their thoughts, perceptions, and actions towards Aboriginal students. Consequently, many Aboriginal students carry with them their own sets of experiences that influence their thoughts and perceptions about mainstream education and have a significant impact on their subsequent educational experiences. In this section, I explore one of those influential experiences that likely had a significant impact on my own early educational experiences.

I struggled in naming the educational experiences that the women described as experiences of racism. These challenging experiences that may be defined as racism emerge through a variety of implicit and explicit ways. For the most part, with respect to the educational experiences described by the participants as well as my own, it is a challenge that is indirect in nature and expressed through the actions of individuals and manifested in institutional policies. Thus, naming it, describing it, discussing it, and attempting to transform it, becomes a challenge in and of itself. Riley and Ungerleider (2008) describe both the difficulty in identifying racism and the related difficulty in addressing racism:

Racism and discrimination are like rocks thrown into a pond: the ripples persist long after those who cast the rocks have disappeared. Such is the difficulty in identifying critical factors in the lack of educational success among particular students. The eradication of racism and discrimination in schools is contingent on our understandings and awareness of the problem and how it can be addressed. Without empirical data to help identify where the rocks have been thrown and who threw them, creating effective strategies to combat discrimination in schools will be difficult. (p. 386)

Racism as it is experienced by Aboriginal students throughout their educational journeys does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped by experiences that go above and beyond the educational milieu. It rises out of the greater political, historical, and social mindsets that influence the perceptions and actions of those who are entrenched in mainstream thought. As such, and through its implicit nature, racism becomes difficult to name. My difficulty in naming this challenge led to a brief conversation with one of my

colleagues about racism and whether naming these experiences as racist would be too harsh. We discussed the term “race” as being a social construct and whether or not racism and the act of racism must stem from intention. I then decided to name this challenge discrimination rather than racism. A few days later as I was reading the book *This is an honour song: Twenty years since the blockades*, I came across an article by Harmony Rice (2010) in which she highlights an interview she had with a Métis Artist, Christi Belcourt, about her experience of the “Oka Crisis” that took place in the summer of 1990. Reflecting on the events that took place that summer, Belcourt (cited in Rice, 2010) asserts that “the racism that existed then still exists today” (p. 25). She recalls her experience as one that taught her that:

Racism exists within Canada and it’s only covered by a very thin and fragile veneer - and that if we as Aboriginal people become unified or assert our rights in a physical way it cracks their veneer and they allow their deep feelings of hatred for us to show. (p. 24)

She recalls being:

Horried to see the racism of Quebecers and Canadians come out, particularly seeing rocks being thrown at cars with Grandmothers and children inside. It was ugly and shameful. I think it shocked many people, myself included, to realize Canadians were capable of this. (p. 24)

When I read Belcourt’s accounts of the “Oka Crisis,” I thought about my own recollection of the events that occurred in the summer of 1990. While I was only 8 years old at the time, I can remember participating in a demonstration that took place in Fort Erie to support the Mohawks of Kanehsatà:ke who were protesting a golf course

expansion that was set to take place on their traditional territory in protection of a sacred burial ground and their ancestral Pines. Despite my limited and naive understanding of the political agenda behind the events that took place during the summer of 1990, I developed, nonetheless, an understanding of racism.

I then thought of my own educational narrative that I had written as a first step in this research project. More specifically, I remembered my own surprise when I reflected on my awareness of racism at a very early age. As I reveal in my narrative, the fourth grade always stood out as a year for me when I moved into my own understandings about racism. It was in Grade 4 that I actually thought of one of my teachers as displaying racism and treating a group of students, including myself, differently than the rest of the students in the class. It was not until I stumbled across this book, however, that I made a connection between the summer of 1990 when the events at Oka took place and the fall of 1990 when I began my fourth grade. It is because of this connection along with my desire to honour the women's voices by using their words as much as possible, that I chose to use the word "racism" as opposed to a more subtle word such as "discrimination."

The in-class experiences that can be described as experiences of racism stem from a deeply embedded mindset among non-Aboriginal Canadians that clashes with young Aboriginal students throughout their school years. For the women participants in Wildfire Gathering 2, these experiences had an impact that cut deeply within them and have not been forgotten. The women revealed that racism does exist in classrooms. This is critical because it could be just that one teacher and that one experience that has a lasting impact on the student. The rippling effect of such experiences are evident in the achievement

gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and the appalling dropout rates of Aboriginal students.

It is important to reflect on monumental experiences, such as the events of Oka, along with the educational experiences of Aboriginal students that may be related through time and place just as it is important that we understand and uncover Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations outside the class to understand related experiences in the class. Much like our Elders tell us that we must know where we come from to know where we are going, we must also understand the past before we can move forward. The above reflection looks back and connects my own early educational experiences with the greater political experiences occurring at the same time. More recently, 2006-07, and geographically closer, have been the Six Nations land claim struggles over a building site at Caledonia near Brantford, Ontario. I am well aware from my own personal experience the harm that is inflicted when these disputes are debated in class. Many local Aboriginal women coming into university will have personal ties to this community and may also experience tensions associated with these in-class discussions making it important to provide staff, faculty, and students with a complete understanding of these issues. Solutions and responses to the educational experiences of Aboriginal women must begin with a recovering and understanding of this past before we can look towards the future. Armed with the knowledge of the need to go back and look into the past before moving forward, the need for moving forward through a process of decolonizing becomes clear.

The women participants in this study disclosed very difficult educational experiences in Wildfire Gathering 2, which contribute to this push for responsive programming revealing the need for an urgent response. Through their participation in

this project, these young women have become agents of social change. These women represent strength, determination, and resilience and they are the leaders of the future generations.

### **Providing Access – Beyond *Opening the Door***

The above discussion on identifying racism in the educational experiences of Aboriginal students is critical to a discussion on Aboriginal women's access to university because, as the aforementioned outlines, the experiences of Aboriginal women, as demonstrated by the participants, the literature, and my own story, are characterized by racism. The extent of the racism is such that it leaves a deep impact on subsequent educational experiences. For the women in this study, this was displayed through emotions that surfaced as they relived such experiences in sharing their stories during Wildfire Gathering 2. These women have made it into the university setting to share their stories. They have persevered and found within themselves the strength and the courage to walk through the university doors, 3 of them as students and 1 as a visitor with hopes to pursue postsecondary studies in the future. There are many Aboriginal women, however, who have not yet made it through the university doors to share their stories. My difficulty in recruiting participants for this study can attest to this limitation. As Riley and Ungerleider (2008) articulate "racism and discrimination may be the gatekeepers that keep students from fulfilling their potential, either because they no longer trust the system to provide an environment conducive to learning or because they were never even allowed through the gate" (p. 386). While the purpose of this study is about opening up those doors and creating access for Aboriginal women and families, the importance of getting to the root of the problem has, throughout this research, become increasingly

evident. As racism and discrimination are rooted in colonization, getting to the root of the problem involves the decolonization of the educational experiences of Aboriginal women. In the following sections, I position language and culture as core elements of a decolonizing process that will encourage the development of strong identities.

### **Language**

“This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.” Adrienne Rich

In the above statement Adrienne Rich captures a very fundamental truth about language and social change. Much like Katherine’s articulations that I presented in Chapter Five, traditional knowledge is not recognized on par with academic knowledge; those whose “acceptable” academic language capacities are limited are often not listened to or taken seriously. In writing this thesis I struggled with language and putting my ideas that were well thought out, yet complex, into words that were clear, logical, and articulate. Feeling as though I am suffering from a case of academic awkwardness, I wrote the following piece to express what I was going through in my struggle to write academically:

*I am Having Difficulty Writing!* What is missing is the ability to express my feelings in words. What is missing is a language of feelings. I know what I want to say, I have feelings and ideas that are deep rooted and resonate within my core. I am aware of the connectedness between my ideas and these deep-rooted feelings and emotions that make these ideas come to life. Yet, I lack the language to articulate these thoughts in ways that make sense and give merit to the way they are experienced.

My above reflection on my troubles with the writing process in putting together this thesis, reflect the limitations of writing in standard academic ways. This very struggle is also a barrier that Aboriginal women face in academia. It demonstrates that academic language itself can be alienating to Aboriginal students (Kenny, 2006; Monture-Angus, 1995). For this reason, it is important not only to be able to write in a way that gives merit to my story and the narratives of the participants, but also to write in a way that is accessible to other Aboriginal women. When I talk about my feelings and ideas resonating deep within, I am reflecting on my own connection with this thesis as it is an extension of my own story.

The following piece describes the limitations of language and the difficulty that one has in putting experience into words:

Adjectives fail to capture the way in which I experience....Even for myself I can never fully give an account of what I experience in a particular Moment or place. What belongs to my inner life seems quite beyond words. The most carefully crafted poem falls short. No one can quite feel what I feel. No one can quite see what and how I see, no matter how hard he or she may try. This means that in any particular situation we may not understand things as does the person next to us. And yet, within certain cultural limits and contexts we use the same words and the same language to describe our experiences. What, then, does language describe? (van Manen, 1997, pp. xii – xiii)

Cherrie Moraga cited in Smith (1999), comments on the lack of her own language in the following:



I lack imagination you say

No. I lack language.

The language to clarify

my resistance to the literate....(p. 40)

Likewise, I am lacking my own language to clarify the need of responsive educational programming for Aboriginal women. While I am limited to the confines of standard academic language, I am lacking a language that is sacred and based in Indigenous relationships with creation; a language that is needed to articulate the cultural and ceremonial traditions necessary for culturally appropriate educational opportunities for Aboriginal women. In short, I am lacking in my language as a Mohawk woman; a language that I need to express my lived experience as a Mohawk woman.

Early on in the introductory chapter of this thesis, I offered a brief discussion of language and the need for language reclamation as part of a decolonizing process. I talked about my own steps towards learning the Mohawk language and the opportunity that I have had to do that through classes at Brock University. I attempted to outline the deeper connection between language and relationships. However, as someone who is in the beginning phases of learning the language, my understanding of this is limited. The following excerpt from Tom Porter (2008) reveals what I was initially attempting to articulate:

Like all people of the world, we have a language. I know you're not gonna understand my language, but I wish you could. Because Mohawk is beautiful. The language that I heard my grandma and my Mother talk is very poetic, but it wasn't meant to be poetry. It just was. And it just is yet today.

I used to listen to Grandma talk, all the old Elders talk, and all the old Chiefs talk. And when they used to tell stories about long ago, I listened to the words, and I saw vivid pictures of action, of colours, of even songs in the language.

When any of my Elders talk Mohawk, when they describe something, it's just as if the whole side of this building was the great big screen of an outdoor theater that has three dimensions to it....When you hear the language and you understand, it's like 3D. It's in Technicolor. If you can really understand Indian, you can smell the food when it's cooking, you can smell the trees and the water when someone is speaking it. It's a living language. (p. 92)

### **Identity and Culture**

As Chapter Five reveals, the term identity alone is complex. This is especially true for Aboriginal peoples. Identity issues are rooted in the historical relationships amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, and stem from the history of colonialism and the dispossession of land, languages, and cultures. Moreover, recurring political and social abuses against Aboriginal peoples continue to create and perpetuate identity crises. In turn, through internalized oppression, Aboriginal peoples themselves have bolstered fractured identities. As Taiaiake Alfred (2009) asserts, however, “a parallel truth – and, in most cases, it is almost unspeakable – is that the injustice and sickness are perpetuated and compounded from within” (p. 58). He describes this violence and self-inflicted hatred that is so prevalent in Aboriginal communities as being common among colonized peoples claiming that “although ‘they’ began our oppression ‘we’ have to a large degree perpetuated it” (p. 58). Moreover, broken identities are such a

complicated issue that many Aboriginal people are struggling to find out who they are.

“Yet the real tragedy is that many Native people are left to wander aimlessly for want of the inspiration that a healthy, supportive and cohesive community could provide” (p. 58).

In their quest, and in lack of this supportive and cohesive community, many are succumbing to the contemporary problems that are so prevalent among Aboriginal populations.

Lawrence (2003) asserts that “Native identity has for generations been legally defined by legislation based on colonialist assumptions about race, Nativeness, and civilization, which are deeply rooted in European modernity” (p. 24). Moreover, Lawrence outlines how the regulation of identity is rooted in the colonization process by discussing the systems of classification based on racist and sexist ideas. Lawrence notes that these systems of classifying Native identity serve to divide communities, and, in turn, positioning colonial frameworks within the community where Native people themselves begin to govern their own communities through colonial constructions of Indianness. According to Hundleby, Gfellner, and Racine (2007), “an awareness of the dynamics involved in Aboriginal identity and how it contributes to adaptive development is essential to aid future generations in achieving their potential” (p. 226).

Resulting from these colonial frameworks that govern Aboriginal communities are deep rooted issues associated with internal shame and cultural disconnectedness. There is little, if any, research that identifies and exposes the ways in which the cycle of shame exists and manifests itself within Aboriginal peoples. The findings from my story and the participants’ stories expose that cultural shame does exist in the lives of Aboriginal women; however, there is much more that must be understood about this

shame cycle. Greenwald and Harder (1998) explain that shame leads to conformity for acceptance of a social group and to offset associated anxiety of nonacceptance. Thought about in this way, shame is problematic for Aboriginal peoples as it alienates us from ourselves, our history, traditions, culture, and worldview. As one moves further away from their cultural self, the security that comes with having a positive self-identity and a strong sense of self becomes diminished. As a result, one becomes lost between two clashing worldviews. The more Aboriginal peoples move away from their own ways in search of acceptance from the mainstream, the more alienated we become from our identities.

Human beings must manage a complex array of emotions and behaviours in order to maintain themselves in their social network so as to maximize fitness. Affects such as shame and guilt play a useful, even essential, role in guiding individuals' behavior to match well with values of their particular group. These values are themselves based on a number of factors, some of all which are related to inclusive fitness within that social setting. For example, hunting and gathering societies have different values than pastoral societies, based in part on differences in what behaviours are necessary in order to thrive in these environments. These values are communicated via social norms, including those regarding what behavior will be seen as shameful. (Greenwald & Harder, 1998, p. 226)

If we are to reflect on the above statement with an emphasis on early European contact with Indigenous peoples, a number of concerns arise. What is to happen, then, when a hunting and gathering society and a pastoral society come together? What is to happen when one society dominates the other through a process of colonization and

forced assimilation? How then is shame played out in the colonized group? The historical relationship between early European settlers and the First Peoples of Canada characterized by colonization reveals what behaviours, values, and social norms were deemed to be shameful. As a result, as the narratives from the Wildfire Gatherings reveal, shame persists. Still today, especially in the education sector, values and behaviours regulated by social norms continue to dominate and control others. Moreover, as a result of the colonization process and the related abuses to Aboriginal peoples, blood memory and historical trauma continue to influence behavior. These factors as they relate to feelings of shame, and the control of behaviours through shaming and its role in the colonization process, are important areas for further research.

I never understood as much as I do now about the colonization process until I read Tom Porter's (2008) writing on colonization in his book *And Grandma Said...Iroquois Teachings as passed down through the oral tradition*. I recently had the opportunity to listen to Tom Porter, Mohawk of the Bear Clan, give a talk at the Indigenous Peoples Conference at Trent University. I am very honoured to have had the opportunity to listen to him share his beautiful teachings. He has such a thorough and extensive wealth of knowledge and his manner in which he shares it is very gentle. This is how young Aboriginal women should be learning the teachings: in a gentle way so that they are not leaving feeling more ashamed but so they can let go of some of that shame they carry within. When I came across Tom Porter's book at the conference, I was anxious to start reading. His teachings on the colonization process touched my heart and spirit very deeply. To read about how Tom Porter, a well-known knowledge holder and traditional speaker, is still struggling with his own internalized colonization has profoundly

strengthened my awareness of how the colonization process worked. The following pieces from his chapter on colonization attest to the very ways in which colonization has left a deep-seated influence on identity as Tom Porter describes how he himself as a survivor of the St. Regis Mohawk Residential School has internalized much of the abuses he went through in his years at the school:

When I tell the old stories, I've always tried to make them relevant or true in my life. I've found myself rationalizing them. I have done this not because I wanted to, but because of the memories of my childhood, being a kid and going to school. I remember that they used to hit us. (p. 27)

Tom Porter (2008) points out that his experience at the St. Regis Mohawk School was characterized by abuse. He was physically punished for speaking his Mohawk language. He was spiritually abused because he was not permitted to attend Longhouse. He was emotionally and mentally abused because he was “brainwashed” to believe that the “Indian ways” were “nonsense.” His discussion describes that as a result of these abuses, he has now internalized the colonization resulting in what I describe as cultural shame.

What I'm saying to you is that no white man, nobody foreign is there anymore twisting my arm or kicking my butt as they did when I was a kid. Not *anymore*. Because now the image of that person is in here, in my head, way subconsciously kicking my butt everyday. *I'm kicking my own butt*. So no physical American or Canadian man has to do it to me anymore. He's already inside here where I can't get him out. That's what they call the colonization process. That's how effective it is. It's deadly. (p. 30)

I never fully accepted whatever I learned from my people because in the backs of my mind, there is still that person that's telling me, "that's not true". In my subconscious: "that's not true. There's no truth to that. It's not real' *Still*. (p. 36)

While I myself did not attend residential schools (both of my Grandparents did), I also feel this sense of cultural and internal shame. As a result of this shame, at times, I find myself questioning and rationalizing some of my traditional teachings and I am hesitant in what I share about my culture with those outside my cultural sharing group. I believe that overcoming this sense of shame and gaining confidence in expressing myself culturally and spiritually will come through the decolonizing process.

The findings from Wildfire Gathering 2 show how the women were impacted by cultural shame. Today, these women are no longer forbidden to speak their languages. Perhaps this is because they do not have their language. The women are no longer physically punished for expressing themselves culturally and spiritually in the class. Perhaps this is because the implicit attacks on their culture and spirituality in the classrooms have become so accepted that they go unacknowledged. Hundleby et al. (2007) explain how Aboriginal students continue to be colonized through the lack of cultural exposure in school:

Contemporary children and youth continue to be threatened and unable to protect the self from an unsympathetic school system. In this way, they are marginalized. They are not taught in their own tradition in schools or at home, and what they are taught threatens an already fragile identity. (p. 227)

The women, however, have acknowledged a desire to find balance within two worlds, to have access to traditional knowledge in the classroom, and to have exposure to

truthful histories that are relevant to who they are as Aboriginal women. The women themselves envision the very things that were forbidden and literally beaten out of our families in residential schools to be core components within an access program for Aboriginal women. In this way, the education program for Aboriginal women becomes a decolonizing process in which cultural shame is addressed and the development of strong cultural identities is encouraged.

During both Wildfire Gatherings, the Elder spoke about this need for women to know who they are before they can move forward. She revealed the strength that comes with being grounded within yourself and having a strong cultural identity, asserting that once you have your identity no one can take that away from you.

As the women's stories reveal from Wildfire Gathering 2, the women need to have the opportunity to strengthen their cultural identity. While the data show that the women participants do have a solid understanding of their cultural identity, it is also evident that this was not always the case. The women came into their own cultural understanding over time and the depth of their understandings varied. Some were prompted by a negative educational experience as Kim's story reveals, and others developed their cultural identities through community supports. The women's classroom experiences were, however, not conducive to their own cultural identity formation. At critical points throughout their education, the need for a strong cultural identity to assist them in successfully overcoming significant challenges became very evident in the Gathering.

While studies on Aboriginal women's identity development in education are scant, research studies on Aboriginal women in prison appear to have similar findings.



One recent study on Aboriginal women in university and identity change indicates that the development of positive self-identities among Aboriginal women may be attributed to exposure to cultural heritage (Hundleby et al., 2007). Likewise, a recent study on Aboriginal women in prison found that “Aboriginal women’s identities and understanding of being evolved from pain and shame to pride and connection with cultural values and traditions” (Yuen & Pedlar, 2009, p. 547). According to this study, “through cultural ceremonies, the women experienced liberation from a colonized Aboriginal identity” (p. 547). It is important to note that the women in both studies, Aboriginal women in university and Aboriginal women in prison, share similar life narratives. The women in both groups have experienced broken identities rooted in colonization. The women in both groups alike, however, are positively impacted through exposure to cultural activities and traditions. The findings of both studies alike found that women’s cultural identities were strengthened through such activities.

With respect to an access program for Aboriginal women at Brock University, the data stemming from the Wildfire Gatherings speaks to the need to provide an environment that encourages the women to develop strong identities. Carly connected becoming grounded within your own identity to understanding commonalities among Indigenous cultures. Using the metaphor, that “we are like a garden with all different flowers,” she outlines the importance of beginning with a common cultural understanding and from that point encouraging the students to look for their own. Michelle’s example of how the Aboriginal student centre at her institution embraces cultural commonalities serves as an example of how an access program at Brock can do the same. The creation of a women’s access program must include a component that allows for women to

strengthen their cultural identity and become grounded within themselves as Aboriginal women.

### **Connecting my Narrative with the Participant Narratives**

In Wildfire Gathering 2, the Elder explained that “through struggle comes clarity.” The connection between my struggles and the participant’s struggles provided clarity to my educational narrative. As noted in Chapter Three, my initial attempt to organize the 28 barriers that stemmed from my narrative into a Medicine Wheel Framework seemed impossible. These barriers were then organized into six intersecting categories that represent the six major elements of success for accessible education for Aboriginal women: Housing, Funding, Child Care, Academic Support, Cultural Education, and Cultural Student Support. Upon further reflection of my narrative along with the women’s narratives, the vision has become clearer. The connection between my story and the women’s stories rests in the need for Aboriginal women to be spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically available to fully engage in their studies. An access program embedded in a holistic system of support that honours the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women will encourage and support Aboriginal women to achieve their full academic potential while maintaining and strengthening strong cultural identities.

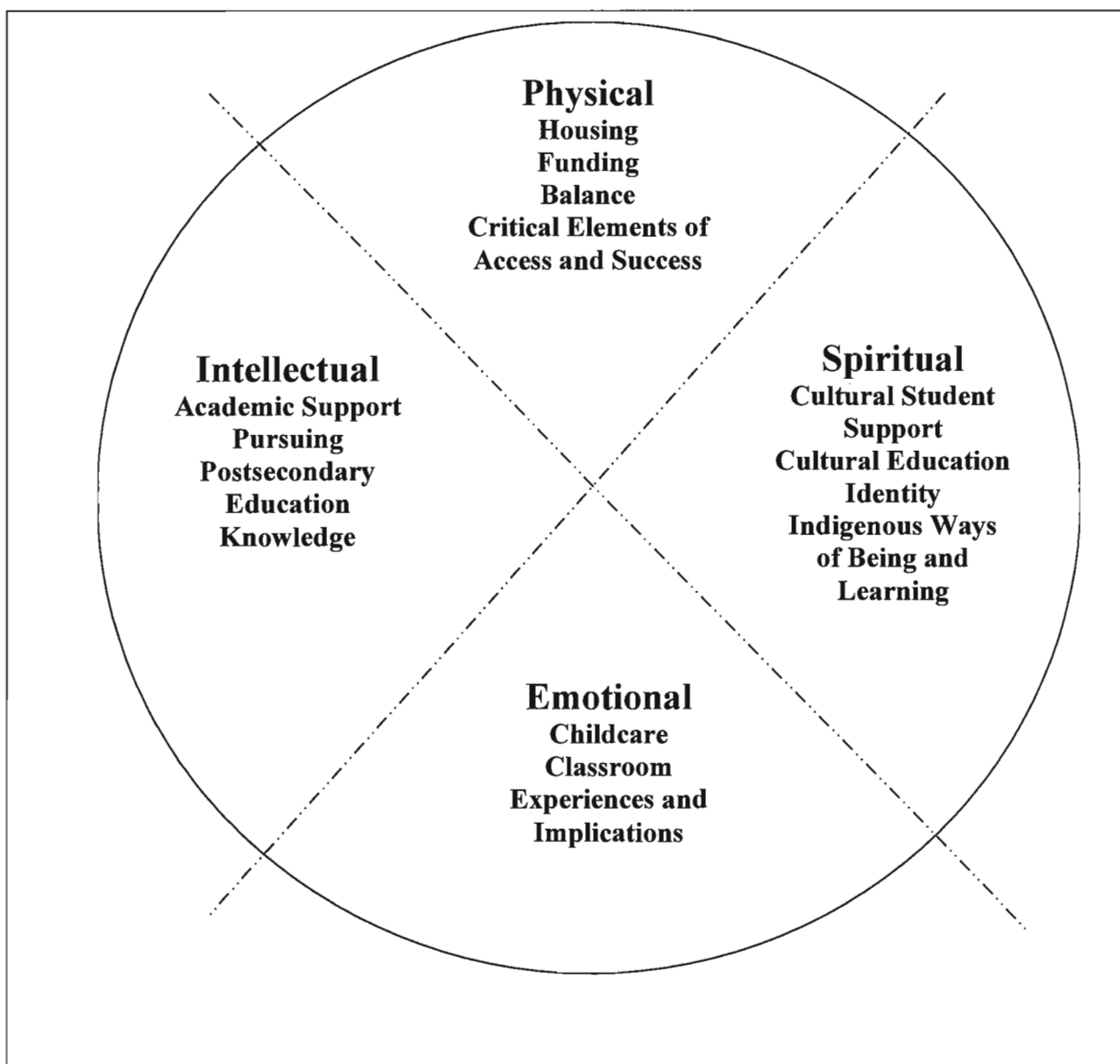
Osenntion and Skonaganleh:rá (2009) write the following from their understanding of a medicine wheel teaching.

The Elders the Traditional People, with whom I have spoken, talk about when peoples of all colours came here and how we came to be and how everybody had her/his own medicine wheel. In that medicine wheel, irrespective of colour was

everything that s/he needed. Inside those medicine wheels were the values and beliefs, and social mores, about how we were to get along. (p. 447)

In that medicine wheel, that way of life we were given, the good life, the good mind, is everything we need. Some of it needs to be interpreted into modern concepts, but in interpretation, we must not lose the truth. (p. 462)

Drawing on this understanding, I have conceptualized the connection between my narrative and the participants' narratives within a Medicine Wheel framework in which everything Aboriginal women need for access to and success within university exists (Figure 4). Cultural student support and cultural education are positioned within the spiritual realm because these elements of success nurture the spirit by providing a spiritually and culturally safe space for Aboriginal women in education. Childcare is positioned within the emotional realm because safe, reliable, and culturally appropriate childcare will enable Aboriginal women to have the peace of mind knowing their children are in a safe and secure childcare setting. Academic support is positioned in the intellectual realm to ensure pedagogically sound practices that will support and encourage Aboriginal women to meet their full intellectual potentials. Housing and Funding are positioned as physical necessities that the women require to be able to be physically available for their studies. I have also placed the theme critical elements of access and success within the physical realm because all of these elements are physically needed for Aboriginal women to be spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically available for access to and success within university. Balance is also placed here because there must be a physical balance among everything within the medicine wheel. Much like the women's narrative crossed into more than one theme, the themes crossed into more



*Figure 5.* Medicine Wheel representing a vision of Aboriginal women's access to and success within universities.

than one element of the Medicine Wheel. An access program that honours the Physical, Spiritual, Emotional, and Intellectual must bring all of the fragmented services together so that everything women need to be physically, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually successful become connected. In this way everything that Aboriginal women need to be successful in university rests in the Medicine Wheel.

### **Implications for Practice: The Need for Responsive Programming**

The previous discussion sets the foundation for an access program that responds to the needs of Aboriginal women and families. First, the need to look backwards and uncover the past before we can look forward and recover from the past has been established by looking at complexities associated with identity and past educational experiences both understood in the context of colonization. Second, the need to reclaim language and culture as core elements of an access program for Aboriginal women has been discussed. Incorporating these elements into a mainstream educational institution requires a paradigm shift in which two vastly different worldviews and epistemologies must converge. With this understanding of the past and the realities that Aboriginal women carry with them into the university, a discussion on responsive programming can then take place.

“We must reinvigorate the principles embedded in the ancient teachings, and use them to address our contemporary problems” (Taiaiake Alfred, 2009, p. 29).

As the previous chapter reveals, an access program that honours the emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual needs of Aboriginal women and their families must begin with a “paradigm shift.” A true access program that honours the aforementioned needs must be more than merely taking existing university courses and supplementing

them with feathers and beads. It must begin with an Indigenous worldview and honour Indigenous ways of being and learning.

With the purpose of this thesis being to uncover the experiences of Aboriginal women in education and envision an access program that responds to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of those women, I have chosen to put forth recommendations for such a program within the themes from this research.

*1. Balance.* The findings from this study attest to the difficulty of Aboriginal women to achieve balance while pursuing their university education. In response, I recommend that the university foster an environment where the women are able to find a harmonious balance throughout their time at the university and acquire the skills to maintain balance beyond their studies. There are many traditional teachings about achieving and maintaining balance of the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical components of self. This is what sustains a healthy well-being. I suggest, along with the participant contributions, that these teachings be brought into the program so that the women are not only encouraged and continually reminded to live in balance but that the university environment can also foster and allow for this balance between two worlds to occur.

Physical balance is an important element of a healthy well-being, especially so among Aboriginal women who have a markedly high risk for many health issues. Participant feedback in Wildfire Gathering 2 suggested that the women were enthusiastic about the idea of incorporating a fitness class and were particularly interested in the idea of a Pow-wow style dance class. As physical balance is important to a healthy lifestyle and well-being, I recommend that there be a physical fitness component to the program that incorporates both fitness and nutrition in a culturally appropriate manner. I also

recommend that healthy and affordable food options be made available on campus, giving the women an opportunity to decolonize their diets.

As the findings suggest, there is also a need for the women to learn and enhance their life skills, including survival skills, time management, and prioritization. In response, I suggest that the access program begin with an accredited life-skills program that responds to the individual needs of the participants and instills in them the skills to find balance among their own intersecting responsibilities that they carry with them and the academic expectations that they will face in the university. In turn, I also recommend that the university (professors and administrators) gain an understanding of the overlapping familial and education responsibilities that Aboriginal women carry. Viable ways of educating the educators must take place for these understandings to be developed.

2. *Identity*. As noted previously, identity may very well be one of the most significant issues facing Aboriginal women today. As issues of identity are rooted in colonization dating back to European contact, the strengthening of Aboriginal women's identities must be positioned within a decolonization process. While it was suggested in Wildfire Gathering 1 that the vision of this program stem from an assets-based approach with culture and language being key assets, it is also accepted that Aboriginal women within the university come from diverse nations. How then is Brock able to develop an access program that encourages the development of strong cultural identities positioned within a decolonizing process through such an assets-based approach? The answer to this question may be found within the Elder's comment in Wildfire Gathering 1 that "we are like a garden with all different flowers." The Elder encouraged that we look for commonalities

among Aboriginal cultures and from these commonalities allow the women to move towards their own culture. In light of the Elder's comment, I recommend that the access program incorporate commonalities into the curriculum and empower the women to develop their own cultural identity. Understanding who they are and where they come from should become a central theme within the women's curriculum. In this way, the women are able to seek out their own identities and bring themselves into the classroom and into their educational work in a decolonizing way. In honour of the above, I recommend that the university and the educators allow the women to bring themselves (their cultural selves and everything they carry with them) into the environment and allow for their education to be positioned with a decolonizing context through the guidance of cultural traditions and language.

There is a need for the university to understand the experiences of Aboriginal women in the context of colonization and understand associated issues of identity and shame in this way. I strongly recommend that educators, especially within the access program but also beyond, understand and are oversensitive to issues of identity and shame. I think that if more teacher education and training had been done in this area, some of the hurtful and shameful experiences that the participants described in Wildfire Gathering 2 may not have occurred. For example, in Wildfire Gathering 2, Amanda described her frustrations with the course content concerning residential schools in one of her women's studies courses. It is extremely important that educators are sensitive when such topics arise. Not only is it important that the curriculum is relevant and truthful, but it is also important that when such topics arise that the feelings of Aboriginal students in the class are of concern and that these students are not subjected to further colonial



abuses through inaccurate and insensitive truths being put forth. I recommend that the instructors of all courses that contain any form of Aboriginal content consult with the community through the Aboriginal Education Council to ensure accuracy and sensitivity of the material.

It is also important that there is a presence of visual representation within the university that reflects Aboriginal identity. I recommend that this visual representation take place at all levels of the university. More specifically, there needs to be more representation within the staff (faculty and administration) and within the “halls” (pictures and artwork). This presence of visual representation must be culturally relevant and reflect positive images of Aboriginal peoples at large.

Overall, with respect to identity, I recommend that the women be encouraged to be who they are, bring their whole-selves into the classrooms (as Aboriginal women, Mothers, Daughters, community members, and so on), and develop strong cultural identities. As the Elder in Wildfire Gathering 2 puts it:

you have to be solid...and feel good about your own identity before you can pass anything out to anyone else....If you know who you are and you accept yourself you're sailing....Nothing can possibly take that away from you or make you feel inferior because you're safe within yourself. (Wildfire Gathering 2)

3. *Educational Experience and Implications.* The findings in this theme included teacher-to-student relationships, insensitive curriculum, becoming the other through tokenism, and educational experiences defined as experiences of racism. These subthemes are related to relationships within the university. Earlier in this chapter, I offered a section on racism outlining that many of the experiences and relationships that occur within

education are influenced by experiences that are beyond the educational sector and make rise out of the greater social and political mindset of mainstream thought. While policies exist within the university to address issues of injustice such as racism through the Office of Human Rights and Equity, for example, the narratives of the women speak to the fact that injustices and experiences that may be defined as experiences of racism continue to exist and are experienced by Aboriginal women. For this reason, I recommend that there be consultation between the access program for Aboriginal women and the Office of Human Rights and Equity to ensure an understanding and a response to these experiences. I also recommend that the relationships between staff (faculty and administrators) and their Aboriginal students, including the Aboriginal women who may participate in the access program, be developed and enhanced through some form of sensitivity training so that the educators and other staff can become more aware and sensitive of these issues. Further, I strongly encourage ongoing relationships and consultations between staff (faculty and administrators) and the Aboriginal Education Council in response to the aforementioned issues.

*4. Pursuing Postsecondary.* As noted in the previous chapter and throughout this thesis, Aboriginal women face numerous barriers in access to and success within university. These barriers are associated with funding, housing, childcare, transportation, culturally relevant services, culturally relevant curriculum, support systems, advocacy and space. Implications for practice as they relate to these barriers will be discussed further in the corresponding section to the theme critical elements for access and success where recommendations to offset these barriers are offered.

Aboriginal women, in general, have motivating forces for attending postsecondary education that are different than other students. As the literature and the findings from this study suggest, these reasons include wanting to provide a better life for their children and their families, and the desire to bring knowledge back to assist their communities. I recommend that the university recognize and acknowledge these motivating forces by offering relevant programming that will assist the women in reaching their goals.

In response to Sharon's suggestion about the need to educate potential students on the reasons why pursuing postsecondary education is important, I recommend that this be incorporated in the recruitment phase of the access program. It is important that Aboriginal women understand what opportunities a university education will provide. Further to this, I think information on career choices and relevant program planning should be provided to potential students. Finally, career counseling and program planning services should be offered throughout the program on an ongoing basis.

*5. Indigenous ways of being and learning.* In this section, I recommend that Indigenous ways of being and learning that inform and are informed from an Indigenous worldview and related epistemic traditions be incorporated into an access program for Aboriginal women. In Wildfire Gathering 1, Katherine suggested that we bring our traditions into the contemporary. She discussed a way that this could be done in an access program in that women each have a unique contribution to offer to the class. Likewise, Darrel suggested incorporating aspects of the Clan System into the program, where one woman can be responsible for childcare and another could be responsible for economics, for example. Drawing on Katherine's and Darrel's suggestions, I recommend that a supportive

learning community be established among the women in the program in which everyone has a unique role and responsibility to the class community and perhaps these roles can change throughout the program, giving the women opportunity to explore different areas. This is one viable example of how to structure the class in a way that models traditional social structures and brings them into a contemporary classroom setting. Another suggestion offered by Delvin was to encourage the women to start writing about the “hallmarks of civilization” in reference to Indigenous knowledges that existed long before contact. I think that writing about the “hallmarks of civilization” is extremely important to a decolonizing education program. I recommend incorporating this into the curriculum. As part of a writing or history course, for example, the women could chose an area of interest, such as traditional birthing practices or traditional parenting practices, and write about these practices as they existed before contact, how they have been influenced and suppressed through contact, and how they can be reinvigorated. I think this type of project could be very empowering for the women and assist them in identity development.

Another implication for practice that arises from this section is kinship and the need to honour all of the things that the women carry with them in their roles as Mothers, Daughters, and so on. Associated with this is the need for the university to recognize, honour, and embrace these roles. Perhaps as suggested by Ilene, there is a need to educate the university on the need to welcome parent and child bonding. As Michelle notes, creating an environment that is culturally based means establishing systems of kinship. I recommend that the university allow for a kinship-based environment that is inclusive of Aboriginal women and their children. This may take the shape of welcoming nursing

children into the classroom and having on-site childcare or an early years centre akin to an Aboriginal Head Start. It may mean that there be an available space for Aboriginal women and children where babies can be nursed, toddlers can be changed, and peers can mind children while the Mother is in class. In whatever form this kinship environment is shaped, I stress the importance of honouring “children as the gift” and providing tangible supports to the women and their families.

There needs to be recognition of the cultural differences between Indigenous and western ideas of education. As noted earlier, I recommend the development of a classroom community in which every woman in that class has a unique and valuable role to contribute to the learning community. This is a shift away from a hierarchical model of learning and towards a more circular model where everyone is equal, much like the research method I employed in this study.

The need to bring in traditional speakers into the program as a shift towards relevant curriculum was noted. Katherine pointed out the importance of honouring the knowledge of our “Aboriginal historians, our storytellers, our Elders” and recognizing that knowledge as equivalent to other professionals who are brought into the university as guest lecturers. This past academic year, the Social and Cultural Committee of the Aboriginal Education Council held a Traditional Speakers Series where traditional speakers came in biweekly to give a talk about a variety of traditional teachings. There are traditional speakers available who have a great wealth of knowledge to share. I urge the university to acknowledge the valuable knowledge that these traditional speakers hold by inviting them to share their teachings in the classrooms and recognizing their contributions on par with other professionals and guest speakers at the university. The

role of traditional speakers in the access program is unquestionably necessary to the success of the program. Further to this, however, traditional speakers should be invited as guest lecturers in classes beyond the access program where Aboriginal content is part of the course.

6. *Knowledge*. Katherine's comment about the importance of language as it is intricately connected to culture and ceremony reveals the importance of learning and reclaiming Aboriginal languages. The connection between language and culture is highly evident in the Mohawk language courses taught at Brock University. In these classes, students are not only taught the language but they are taught the culture behind the language. The Mohawk language, as noted in Chapter One, is based on the relationships that derive from cultural ways. The Mohawk language and spirituality courses at Brock serve as honourable representations of university courses that are guided by an Indigenous worldview and honour Indigenous ways of being and learning. These classes taught by instructor Sakoieta Widrick, Mohawk of the Wolf Clan, are taught in a way that honours the moon cycles relevant to learning and the ability to hold and retain new knowledge. The classes also begin and end with a traditional opening and closing. The participants in these classes, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, all very much become a community. There is a classroom spirit that I had never experienced prior to my participation in Sakoieta's classes. Unlike any other class I have taken here at Brock, I was able to bring my children to class. This made the evening classes accessible to me regardless of my lack of evening childcare. This classroom became very much like the class Valerie described where the presence of children changed the classroom spirit. All of my classmates were not only tolerable and accepting of my son, but they also encouraged and

assisted with his engagement in class activities. The Mohawk Language and Spirituality classes taught by Sakoieta Widrick, which represent the paradigm shift that Valerie outlines as a necessity for an access program for Aboriginal women and families, serves as a model for the recommended access program.

Balance in two worlds means that students must not learn from only one epistemic tradition. To achieve balance, learning must incorporate teachings from both the Indigenous and mainstream systems. Based on the findings from this study, I recommend that the access program incorporate into the curriculum a series of lessons that will assist Aboriginal learners in developing the skills necessary to excel in the program and beyond. More specifically, I suggest that an initial introduction to the “language of the university” and managing the library be offered. I also suggest that critical thinking skills, writing skills, reading skills, and numeracy skills be incorporated into the program. As Katherine suggested in Wildfire Gathering 1, it may be useful and more accessible to the women if these resources are brought to the students, rather than simply referring them to the library. The women in Wildfire Gathering 2 also offered some suggestions of what they want to learn about: Aboriginal history, traditional teachings, women’s stories, traditional parenting, spirituality, women’s health issues, fitness and nutrition, and traditional family values. I recommend that all of these suggestions be incorporated into a curriculum for Aboriginal women. As Kim suggested in Wildfire Gathering 2, it is important to assess the student needs on an ongoing basis because these needs may be different year after year. This suggests the need for ongoing needs assessment and program evaluation.

*7. Critical Elements for Access and Success.* As noted in the previous chapter, there are an array of accessibility barriers that make pursuing university a difficult task for Aboriginal women. These barriers include the lack of funding, housing, childcare, transportation, culturally relevant services, support systems, and space. As noted previously, Wildfire Gathering 1 brought together “Experts in the Fields” who represented the six major elements of success: housing, funding, childcare, academic support, cultural education, and cultural student support as informed by my own educational narrative. The purpose of bringing representatives from these sectors together was to come to a shared understanding and knowledge base to vision an access program for Aboriginal women and families. As my educational narrative revealed, these service areas are isolated and fragmented from one another in such a way that allows for the overlapping of criteria putting women in a vulnerable position in which negotiations must be made so that they may work their way through and around these services. My story was reflected in the stories of the women participants who also struggled with the disconnection of services, such as housing, funding, childcare, and education, that all have overlapping and unfeasible requirements and criteria making it nearly impossible for students to access resources.

In Wildfire Gathering 2, I shared my story of attempting to negotiate a childcare agreement that conflicted with my student schedule as an example of my experience with the fragmentation of services, and I explained my purpose of Wildfire Gathering 1 to piece together and connect the above fragmented services as a way to begin to vision an access program that meets the needs of Aboriginal women and families. In response, the participants in Wildfire Gathering 1 recognized the need for a liaison worker to bring



together all of the above services. Amanda replied “If all of these things were in order it would be easier to go to school.” Likewise, noting that she is too worried about housing, childcare, and financial issues to think seriously about pursuing postsecondary education, Sherry stated “but it is something I would like to do eventually. So if there is a program that can make that easier for me than it would be really helpful” (Wildfire Gathering 2). The need for a liaison officer was also established in Wildfire Gathering 1. Katherine outlined the need for a liaison worker to bring together and connect the pieces for the women:

My points are on the childcare and the access and if you have these 20 women that are coming in and you know that some of them...have children under certain ages, then perhaps there should be some sort of liaison worker in that access program. I guess the professional part of that would be to help to bring those relationships and get that going as soon as they are accepted so whether you have that worker that does all of that work and giving some of that responsibility back to the Mothers to complete the forms and have them in by a certain date and that liaison worker because sometimes things happen and paperwork gets lost and juice gets spilled on it so just making sure that okay this was the deadline and you know a couple of days before the deadline you’re going to have your liaison worker give them a call and say we haven’t received your paperwork and we are going to have another information session on how to go through that process and a tour of the actual facility and this should all actually happen before the first day of school. (Wildfire Gathering 1)

In response, I strongly recommend the creation of a liaison worker position as part of the access program to bring together all of the fragmented services necessary for Aboriginal women's access to and success within the university.

In addition to the above, the following list of recommendations is critical to the success of an access program for Aboriginal women in education:

1. Ensure that bursary funding information is available to all students.
2. Source program funding avenues for both status and non-status participants.
3. Source additional funding sources to offset childcare costs.
4. Establish housing partnerships and partnerships with the university residence to secure available spaces for Aboriginal women and families.
5. Establish an onsite culturally relevant childcare program.
6. Establish relationships with the Children's Services of the Regional Community Services Department to create a feasibility partnership between childcare subsidies and childcare providers. This partnership should be a feasible response to the needs of Aboriginal women in university and by extension must align with student schedules and allow for study time.
7. Establish a relationship with the university childcare centre to promote culturally appropriate childcare.
8. Offer training for childcare providers to educate them on the unique realities of Aboriginal women and children, and encourage a more holistic childcare program that embraces the whole family.
9. Assess and respond to the transportation needs of participants.

10. Consult with the participants about their student service needs on an ongoing basis and ensure culturally relevant services.
11. Establish an Elder-in-residence program specific to the program to ensure culturally appropriate guidance and counselling services.
12. Engage with Aboriginal communities by establishing partnerships with local Native Friendship Centres and Aboriginal service providers.
13. Develop a family orientation to the program to encourage family and partner support.
14. Establish a mentorship program so that the first cohort of learners can strike a supportive relationship with the second cohort.
15. Bring in positive role models as guest speakers to share success stories.
16. Encourage the development of a community of learners to serve as a support circle for participants.
17. Provide a gathering space for the women and families to gather for study time and allow for cultural activities.
18. Provide a comfortable space on campus for parents and their young children, including a space for play, nursing and changing diapers.

Further to these program recommendations, some other long term goals should include sustainable program funding, ongoing needs assessment, and program evaluation. Sustainable program funding will allow program reliability and consistency allowing the program to build a positive reputation that Aboriginal women can depend on. Ongoing needs assessment is important to assess the needs of Aboriginal women as these will change overtime and may even fluctuate year to year. This will ensure that the program is

up to date in responding to the localized needs of Aboriginal women. Finally, program evaluation will determine the effectiveness of the program in meeting its vision of access to and success within the university as defined by the participants.

### **Conclusion**

An access program for Aboriginal women can be thought of from two vastly different ideological positions. One ideology stems from a deficit-based view, positioning Aboriginal women as needing assistance in access to university as demonstrated by the achievement gap with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Because of the low representation of Aboriginal women in university, they must need special assistance in meeting university level standards. This position favours one system of learning over another. It “problematizes” Aboriginal women and views education as a viable solution to the “problem.”

The other ideological position stems from a strength-based view, understanding the experiences of Aboriginal women in education through the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts that shape their everyday lives. It understands the barriers Aboriginal women face in access to and within education in the context of colonization and institutionalized racism. It acknowledges an Aboriginal way of being and learning as legitimate knowledge. It recognizes the need to honour the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual components of self. It recognizes language and culture as essential in supporting and encouraging the development of strong identities among Aboriginal women.

It is my hope that those who read this thesis will understand the experiences of Aboriginal women in university from the latter ideological position. Only through this

understanding will an access program be a holistic response to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their children, and, ultimately, promote the well-being of Aboriginal families and strengthening of the Aboriginal community.

I will end this thesis with one final recommendation that was given during Wildfire Gathering 1: In the words of one of the Elders: “Don’t let this sit on the shelf. Use it and do something about it.”

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## **Appendix A**

### **Wildfire Gathering 1: Discussion Guide**

#### Vision

Our vision is to develop a University access program that embraces the realities of young Aboriginal women, encourages positive self-identities, empowers the women and provides them with the skills to succeed in the University. It is our vision that such a program will be a holistic response to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical needs, and that it will heal and support Aboriginal women and children who face numerous barriers that hinder their educational experiences. As 'Experts in The Field' we ask that your expertise inform this vision.

#### Relationships

What relationships are needed to improve the women's experiences at Brock University and help them to succeed? Relationships with faculty, student support services, administration services, child care providers, community support services may be included.

#### Knowledge

How has Aboriginal knowledge, traditions and ways of being been represented in the women's experience of education to date? How can the women be prepared to deal with the boundaries that they will encounter so that they can break through those boundaries and be successful?

#### Action

What steps are needed to be put in place for the women to succeed in this program and maintain the relationships that have been developed so that they can go on in their program of study?

## Appendix B

### Aboriginal Women in Education: Fact Sheet

**“Aboriginal women’s educational achievements in recent years reflect the power of resiliency, strength and determination. Our women are now attending school at higher rates than both non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men, while continuing to raise their families; most often single handedly, and in situations of poverty.”**

**Native Women’s Association of Canada 2009**

The Aboriginal female population is growing much faster than the non-Aboriginal female population. The number of Aboriginal women and girls has risen 20.3% from 2001 to 2006 compared with only 5.6% for their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Postsecondary educational attainment is on the rise for Aboriginal women in Canada.

Data from the 2006 Census suggests that 9% of Aboriginal women in Canada have a University degree compared to 23% of non-Aboriginal women in Canada.

Data also suggests that Aboriginal women are likely to postpone their postsecondary studies until later in life.

There are more Aboriginal women in the older age categories (35-39 to 50 to 54) with postsecondary education than in the younger age groups (25 to 29 and 30 to 34). Data suggests the opposite trend among the non-Aboriginal population where there are younger women than older women with post secondary education.

There is a strong relationship between postsecondary education and employment among the Aboriginal population. For example, the employment rate for an Aboriginal woman with a high school diploma is 58% compared to 80% for those with a University degree.

Family responsibilities and financial reasons are often cited as reasons for not completing postsecondary programs.

One in three Aboriginal women who are mothers are single mothers. One third of these women are raising three or more children.

Giving the above demographics it is reasonable to conclude that Aboriginal women have unique and specific needs with respect to postsecondary education. This project aspires to develop an access program for Aboriginal women that will be a holistic response to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their families.

## Appendix C

### Wildfire Gathering 2: Discussion Guide

#### Vision

What is your vision of an ideal access program designed to meet the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women? What should be the key elements of such a program?

#### Relationships

What relationships are needed to allow for your success in such a program? Are the following relationships important (faculty, student support services, Aboriginal student services, administration services, child care providers, community support services, cultural support services)?

#### Knowledge

What kind of knowledge do you need in order to be successful?  
Is Aboriginal knowledge, traditions and ways of being important to your success?

#### Action

What is needed in an access program that meets your, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs as a young Aboriginal woman?

## Appendix D

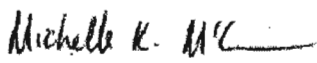
## Brock University Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter



Office of Research Services  
Research Ethics Office  
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1  
T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3045/4876 F: 905-688-0748

[www.brocku.ca](http://www.brocku.ca)

DATE: October 20, 2009

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB) 

TO: Michael Manley-Casimir, Tecumseh Centre  
Jennifer Brant, John Hodson

FILE: 09-037 MANLEY-CASIMIR  
Masters Thesis/Project

TITLE: Learning Ehsikanyai: Developing an Aboriginal Women's Access Program at Brock University

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The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

**DECISION:** Accepted as clarified

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of October 20, 2009 to January 1, 2010 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form *Continuing Review/Final Report* is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/mb